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Parental Psychological Control, Attachment, and Perpetration of Psychological
Aggression

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Psychology

by

D. Drew Whittington

B.A., University of South Alabama, 2020

May, 2022

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List of Abbreviations

IPV	=	Intimate partner violence
PPC	=	Parental psychological control
PCS	=	Parental Psychological Control Scale
ECR-R	=	Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised
ADA	=	Adult Disorganized Attachment
CFI	=	Comparative Fit Index
TLI	=	Tucker-Lewis Index
RMSEA	=	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SRMR	=	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

Abstract

Whittington, D., Drew, M.S., University of South Alabama, May 2022. Parental Psychological Control, Attachment, and Perpetration of Psychological Aggression. Chair of Committee: Lisa Turner, Ph.D.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) can be considered a major public health concern in the United States. Approximately 25% of women, and 10% of men in the United States experience some form of IPV. Previous research has provided evidence that individuals' attachment orientations predict their perpetration of psychological aggression toward romantic partners. Furthermore, it is also known that experiences of parental psychological control (PPC) are related to attachment anxiety and avoidance, and indirectly related to perpetration of psychological aggression. However, little previous research has been conducted on disorganized attachment in adulthood, and therefore the current investigation was focused on the relation of PPC to disorganized attachment and psychological aggression. The current study examined a cross-sectional mediation model of parental psychological control, attachment, and psychological aggression. Structural equation modeling indicated support for the overall model for only heterosexual participants. Parental psychological control was significantly positively related to each dimension of attachment, but only disorganization was significantly related to psychological aggression. Attachment anxiety and avoidance did not contribute any unique variance after controlling for disorganization. Findings provide potentially useful information concerning the unique type of fear captured in disorganized attachment.

Keywords: parenting, psychological aggression, attachment

Chapter I

Parental Psychological Control, Attachment, and Perpetration of Psychological Aggression in Romantic Relationships

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is violence that occurs in the context of romantic relationships and can include a variety of violent behaviors including physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2020). It is estimated that, in the United States, one in four women, and one in nine to ten men have experienced some form of IPV (CDC, 2020; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020). Although there are a variety of behaviors that can be grouped together to conceptualize IPV, two main forms of violence arise from these behaviors: physical and psychological aggression (sometimes referred to as verbal aggression), both of which can be conceptualized as tactics used to solve conflicts in romantic relationships. However, although there are these two primary forms, in the current study, the focus will be on psychological aggression.

Psychological aggression involves both verbal and non-verbal acts (excluding physically aggressive behaviors) directed toward romantic partners with the intention of harming the partner emotionally or to control the partner (CDC, 2020). In contrast to physical aggression, which involves acts directed toward a partner's physical self, psychological aggression is directed at the partner's emotional well-being or sense of self (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Further, psychological aggression is a tactic which may result in the romantic partner experiencing feelings of fear (Bennett et al., 2011), and fear induction is likely the way in which psychological aggression works to control romantic

partners. However, although some literature discusses and attempts to measure psychological aggression in terms of emotional abuse (e.g., Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Wolfe et al., 2001), other literature discusses psychological aggression by level of severity (e.g., Follingstad et al., 2005), implying that not all psychologically aggressive behaviors are of equal severity.

The focus of the current study is on emerging adults. Although emerging adulthood is not traditionally marked by specific developmental milestones, the exploration of romantic relationships is an important task for emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Due to the prevalence and danger of IPV, it is important to investigate potential predictors of violence within emerging adults' romantic relationships. In the current study, the goal is to test developmental and individual predictors of psychological aggression perpetration. Because a large piece of attachment theory includes individuals' tendencies to seek and maintain proximity to the partner, it would seem particularly valuable to turn to this theory to further investigate the reasoning behind why individuals might engage in psychologically aggressive behaviors, which may exacerbate conflict and push partners further apart, which contrasts with the needs of the attachment system. Furthermore, to better capture the full picture, it is useful to investigate perceived early environmental experiences to assess whether psychologically manipulative behavior by the parent aimed at the child may act as a precursor to the young adult child using manipulative tactics in their romantic relationships.

Correlates and Predictors of Psychological Aggression

Perpetration and victimization of psychological aggression have many negative implications for romantic relationships. Empirically speaking, Jouriles et al. (2009) found

that psychological aggression victimization was related to psychological distress across the span of two to eight weeks. Additionally, other researchers have found cross-sectional positive relations between psychological aggression victimization and relationship deterioration and deterioration of physical health in adolescents (Fernández-Feurtes & Fuertes, 2010). Other cross-sectional research on psychological aggression victimization in adulthood has also shown it to be correlated with mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Sargent et al., 2016; Taft et al., 2006), highlighting the importance of exploring and understanding why individuals engage in perpetration of this type of aggression.

Because of the negative implications psychological aggression may have on romantic relationships and mental health outcomes, it is important to understand predictors of psychological aggression perpetration. Previous researchers have identified a variety of predictors of individuals' perpetration of psychological aggression. In adolescents, Fernández-Fuertes and Fuertes (2010) found that dissatisfaction with the partner, jealousy, and relationship decline were significant predictors of psychological aggression perpetration. Likewise, Muñoz-Fernández and Sánchez-Jiménez (2020) found that difficulties with anger regulation and jealousy significantly predicted perpetration of psychological aggression in a short-term longitudinal study with adolescents. A recent meta-analysis also found that interparental aggression is a significant predictor of both psychological aggression perpetration and victimization (Goncy, 2020). Altogether, previous research suggests that characteristics of both the family environment in which the individual grew up, characteristics of the individual, and characteristics of the relationship predict perpetration of psychological aggression toward romantic partners.

The current investigation will examine both family and individual characteristics as predictors of perpetration.

There are likely many pathways and reasons why individuals engage in psychological aggression toward partners. In the current study, the focus is on two primary theoretical perspectives for understanding perpetration of psychological aggression. First, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a solid basis for understanding why children might first learn manipulative tactics from parents. If parents continuously use controlling and manipulative tactics to achieve behavioral outcomes with the child, the child might begin to view these tactics as acceptable at achieving an intended outcome. Furthermore, based on operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1963), this might be further exacerbated if children begin using these tactics with others and find them to be successful at achieving their interpersonal goals. Beyond learning theory, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) may contribute to understanding whether frustrations within an individual's attachment system and the biological drive to seek proximity with the romantic partner may contribute to use of psychological aggression as an attempt to bring the partner closer, or potentially to protect the self in attachment systems driven by fear or avoidance of intimacy.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby (1969), began as a theory for understanding parent-child relationships. Ainsworth (1973, p. 1) defined attachment as “an affectional tie that one person forms to another specific person, binding them together in space and enduring over time.” The foundation of attachment theory holds that individuals' experiences in early relationships, particularly parent-child relationships,

contribute to individuals' mental representations and expectations of other relationships throughout the life span, and these mental representations are often referred to as "internal working models." It is generally believed that the attachment system serves an evolutionary purpose, with proximity seeking to the caregiver increasing the likelihood of survival (see Ainsworth, 1973, for an in-depth discussion of the biological functions of attachment). Following the introduction of parent-child attachment by Bowlby and Ainsworth, Hazan and Shaver (1987) first utilized attachment theory in the context of romantic partners, arguing that much of attachment theory can be applied to attachment to romantic partners in adulthood.

Attachment in adulthood has traditionally been classified in using two primary dimensions: Anxiety/preoccupation, and avoidance. From these two dimensions, researchers have traditionally derived three distinct styles of attachment: anxious (high anxiety, low avoidance), avoidant (low anxiety, high avoidance), and secure (low anxiety and low avoidance). Individuals with an anxious style of attachment are thought to fear abandonment or rejection by the partner, and strive to maintain proximity, usually to an extreme, while individuals who are more avoidantly attached may experience uncomfortableness with emotional intimacy and relying on others, and seek to maintain distance from the romantic partner (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, although attachment is traditionally conceptualized using these three primary attachment styles, other researchers have introduced a fourth style, fearful-avoidant, which is categorized by high levels of both anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew, 1990; Scharfe, 2016), and, more recently, a fifth style, disorganized (Paetzold et al., 2015) which they conceptualize primarily in terms of fear surrounding romantic partners. The current study places a

specific focus on attachment anxiety and disorganization. Individuals with anxious attachment representations may still have strong desires to seek proximity to the romantic partner, whereas avoidant individuals will primarily desire to remain distant – it may be that individuals with high levels of avoidance may instead withdraw from conflict (e.g., Creasey et al., 1999). Disorganized attachment is included because it is possible that more disorganized individuals may react aggressively due to the conflictual and disoriented nature of this dimension, or as a mechanism for self-protection (Paetzold et al., 2015).

Insecurely attached individuals live with attachment representations that are not optimal. For anxiously attached individuals, this representation involves fear that the attachment figure will abandon them, or that romantic feelings are unrequited. These feelings then drive the individual to seek proximity to the romantic partner. For avoidantly attached individuals, this representation involves repressing attachment needs, potentially due to fear of rejection or desire to remain autonomous (Bartholomew, 1990). In contrast to anxious attachment, avoidantly attached individuals choose to remain distant from the partner and to avoid being emotionally vulnerable. Support for the association of approach behaviors with anxious attachment and avoidance behaviors with avoidant attachment has generally been found when tested under experimental conditions (e.g., Dewitte et al., 2008). In the experimental condition, participants were asked to think about their attachment figure going abroad for a long while and then they completed an approach-avoidance task. Anxiously attached individuals primed with the separation threat indicated a stronger approach tendency. For avoidance, it was found that avoidance

was associated with a lower tendency to approach the attachment figure regardless of the distressful nature of the situation.

However, unlike anxious and avoidantly attached individuals (also known as the insecure “organized” categories of attachment, due to the organized and predictable nature of their proximity-seeking behaviors when in distress), disorganized individuals are afraid not necessarily of rejection by the partner, but may be afraid of the attachment figure themselves (Paetzold et al., 2015), potentially leading to “fright without solution,” where this fear (combined with attachment needs) may encourage simultaneous approach and avoidance of the romantic partner, making these individuals exhibit confusing or incoherent attachment behaviors. However, although fear is generally seen as a primary piece of disorganized attachment, it is worth noting that the concept of fear surrounding disorganized attachment, particularly for infant-caregiver attachment, is potentially misunderstood and misused at times, and there may be different uses of the term “fear” in the context of attachment disorganization (Duschinsky, 2018)¹.

In sum, attachment representations are likely to influence individuals’ interpretation of relationships and relationship conflict (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Furthermore, different attachment representations may then have implications for conflict management and for the use of specific aggressive tactics (e.g., McDermott et al., 2017). More specifically, individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety or disorganization

¹Duschinsky (2018) notes that the original references to fear surrounding disorganized attachment are not simply fear of the attachment figure, but fear may also be alarm or immediate experience (e.g., the attachment figure is a cue for danger), fear as fright (e.g., the infant remains distressed because the caregiver is not accessible), or fear as apprehension (direct fear of the caregiver).

may experience frustrations of the attachment system when experiencing distress and therefore may be more likely to use psychological aggression as a means to control their romantic partners, whereas highly avoidant individuals may desire to withdraw from conflict (e.g., McDermott et al., 2017).

Attachment and Psychological Aggression

Conflict can pose a major issue for the attachment system: the secure base (attachment object) has now become a source of threat in conflict (Plessis & Clarke, 2008). This perceived threat likely contributes to why previous researchers have found insecure attachment orientations to be consistently associated with unhelpful conflict strategies, including various types of aggression (e.g., Bonache et al., 2019; Hoover & Jackson, 2019). This assertion has also been previously examined in a qualitative manner. The authors found that, while both securely and insecurely attached individuals report knowledge of similar conflict resolution strategies (both helpful and negative), the securely attached individuals reported almost always reaching a solution, and not engaging in behaviors which worsen the problem. On the contrary, insecurely attached individuals reported more negative conflict strategies (e.g., withdrawal, personal insults, blame; Plessis & Clarke, 2008). However, this study examined only anxious and avoidant attachment, and the previous literature on conflict strategies for disorganized individuals is minimal at best. In contrast to anxious and avoidant individuals, disorganized individuals may be more likely to perceive conflict as relationship-threatening, but the experienced approach-avoidance conflict may result in the perceived need to engage in self-protection (Paetzold et al., 2015), and the lack of a coherent attachment strategy may result in individuals failing to use helpful conflict strategies.

Organized Attachment. Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety likely believe conflict is a threat to intimacy and make attempts to maintain proximity to the partner during times of conflict, potentially leading the anxious partner to go to extremes to make the partner stay. Conflict likely makes the attachment system of the anxious person go into hyperactivation, which is typically when the anxious partner will engage in such behaviors, known as “protest” behaviors, which are considered to be responses to a frustrated attachment system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). As a result, there is an increased risk that these individuals then engage in aggressive behaviors, including psychological aggression.

Previous research has generally provided evidence for the relation of attachment anxiety to psychological aggression. In contrast, individuals with high levels of attachment avoidance may be less likely to use aggressive behaviors due to what is referred to as deactivation of the attachment system, when the individual suppresses attachment needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). For example, Hoover and Jackson (2019) found both male and female attachment anxiety to be related to perpetration of psychological aggression. However, they did not find individuals’ attachment avoidance to be significantly related to psychological aggression. Furthermore, Gou and Woodlin (2017) found that attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, predicted psychological aggression one year later. In contrast to these findings, Rholes et al. (2016) found a significant relation of avoidant attachment to psychological aggression, indicating uncertainty regarding whether avoidance is related to this particular conflict tactic. Likewise, Sommer et al. (2017) found that both attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly related to perpetration of psychological aggression in romantic relationships.

However, they found the relation of anxiety to be significant only among men. These mixed findings highlight the confusion surrounding whether attachment avoidance is predictive of engaging in psychologically aggressive behaviors toward one's romantic partner.

Altogether, these findings suggest that the relation of attachment anxiety to psychological aggression is present, but the relation of avoidance to psychological aggression is more unclear. The focus of the current study is on attachment anxiety and disorganization. It is likely that the conflictual nature of disorganized attachment may result in incoherent responses to conflict, which may contribute to the use of aggressive behaviors toward partners.

Disorganized Attachment. Following the developmental literature on attachment, disorganization is seen as being different from both anxious and avoidant attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990). In infancy, in contrast to anxious and avoidantly attached infants, which have predictable responses to distress, disorganized infants likely experience an approach-avoidance conflict in the attachment system and display disoriented behaviors as a result of this conflict. Infants who display this pattern may display odd and disoriented behaviors such as contradictory approach-avoidance behaviors, freezing, displaying apprehension of the caregiver, and odd postures (Duschinsky, 2018). Although adult report of disorganized/unresolved parent-child attachment has been researched (George et al., 1996)², disorganized attachment in the context of romantic relationships has been largely

² Disorganization in adulthood has largely been examined in the context of parent-child attachment, particularly within the use of the Adult Attachment Interview to identify disorganized/unresolved attachment which may be indicated by lapses in logic or speech or lapse in reasoning.

ignored in adulthood. Furthermore, although disorganized is a conceptually more recent form of attachment in the context of romantic relationships, parent-child disorganized attachment has been shown to be associated with increased levels of psychopathology, including depressive and dissociative symptoms in adolescents (e.g., Obsuth et al., 2014). Because of the lack of research on disorganized romantic attachment, and the seemingly negative outcomes associated with disorganized parent-child attachment, it is important to begin exploring disorganization in the context of romantic relationships.

To my knowledge, Paetzold et al. (2015) was the first to design a measure, the Adult Disorganized Attachment scale (or ADA), assessing this fear-based attachment form, using the scale to assess disorganization surrounding romantic relationships in adulthood. Their measurement of disorganization is primarily based on fear and suspicion within romantic relationships, and their initial validation of the scale indicated that anxious and avoidant attachment account for only about half the variation in the ADA, suggesting that this newly conceptualized disorganized attachment is more than a linear combination of the organized dimensions of attachment.

In relation to the purpose of the current study, more disorganized individuals may be more prone to anger and be less likely to recognize the positive role of conflict in their relationships. Recent work on romantic attachment disorganization in adulthood suggests that individuals with disorganized attachment may be more likely to be aggressive toward romantic partners, both physically and psychologically (Paetzold et al., 2015). This study found that disorganization was related to increased anger and hostility. The authors suggest that the confusion about relationships may lead these individuals into a pattern of attack and withdraw, and it may be that they then exhibit confusing and inconsistent

patterns of aggression and withdrawal behaviors. Rholes et al. (2016) elaborated on these findings and reported that disorganized attachment in adulthood, as assessed by the ADA, statistically mediated the relation of childhood maltreatment to various forms of aggression, including psychological aggression, in adult romantic relationships. This was found even after controlling for the organized attachment representations (anxious and avoidant). However, when they controlled for current partner abuse, disorganized attachment no longer mediated the relation of childhood maltreatment to psychological aggression (as disorganized was highly related to partner abuse). They also found that disorganized attachment is indeed separate from fearful-avoidance (or fearful) attachment. Although these are important findings given the lack of knowledge concerning disorganization in adulthood, it is worth noting that these studies (Paetzold et al., 2015; Rholes et al., 2016) appear to come from the same sample of participants, and therefore any limitations or weaknesses of one are inseparable from the other.

Parenting

The purpose of the current study is to examine predictors of psychological aggression in romantic relationships. Previous research has generally shown insecure attachment to be predictive of individuals' use of psychological aggression. However, to fully understand attachment, we must first examine potential factors which contribute to the formation of insecure attachment systems and how experiences with parents may contribute to attachment with romantic partners. Because many researchers consider the family environment to be where individuals first learn interpersonal skills (e.g., Ha et al., 2019), and because the parents/caregivers are the first attachment relationships that contribute to the internal working model, in the current study, the focus will be on

parenting, particularly parental psychological control, as one family factor which may predict young adults' romantic attachment representations, and therefore indirectly contribute to young adult children's use of unhealthy conflict tactics (e.g., psychological aggression).

Parenting can traditionally be conceptualized into one of four styles as a function of how demanding and warm the parent is toward the child. Baumrind (1966) first conceptualized three of these categories: Authoritative, which consists of high levels of warmth and moderate-to-high demandingness; authoritarian, with low warmth and high demandingness; and permissive, which consists of high warmth with little to no demandingness. Later, Maccoby and Martin (1983) introduced a fourth style, uninvolved parenting, which consists of both low warmth and low demandingness. However, although most parenting behaviors can be conceptualized in terms of one of these four styles, much current research focuses on specific facets of parenting that may more concretely describe parenting practices (Gray and Steinberg, 1999).

Parental Psychological Control

In the current study, the focus is on parental psychological control (PPC), which consists of manipulative, intrusive parenting that uses tactics such as guilt induction, love withdrawal, and shaming with efforts to control the child's thoughts and feelings, and this type of control is traditionally thought to inhibit children's psychological development (Barber, 1996). The history of the psychological control construct can be dated back to work done by Schaefer (1965a, 1965b), Baumrind (1966), and to date, much other research surrounding PPC has been conducted by Brian Barber (e.g., Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 2005; Barber et al., 2012), and colleagues. Although a certain level of

control in parent-child relationships may be healthy, PPC involves the use of coercive control, which is manipulative and domineering, and this type of control is contrasted with confrontive control which uses reason and negotiation to achieve intended behavioral outcomes (Baumrind, 2012). Perhaps this use of coercive control and power assertion leads to negative views of the self and children may also begin to view these tactics as acceptable and begin using them with others.

Parental Psychological Control and Attachment. Parental psychological control has notable similarities to psychological aggression. Both use non-physical tactics aimed at controlling the emotional experience or achieving compliance or demands. It is a facet of parenting which is manipulative and intrusive, and it is likely that parents' use of psychologically controlling tactics such as guilt induction and love withdrawal contribute to insecure attachment representations. The lack of emotional validation, inconsistency, and use of love withdrawal is likely to foster a heightened sense of anxiety and sensitivity to rejection in children, particularly for how they view relationships with others (i.e., romantic relationships). Previous research has supported this notion, showing evidence of relations between PPC and insecure attachment. For example, in examining the relation of PPC to jealousy, Choe et al. (2020) found that adolescent reports of parental psychological control at age 16 were related to their romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance at age 18, with the relations being generally smaller for reports of father psychological control than for mother psychological control. Likewise, in a sample of college student emerging adults from Spanish universities, Díez et al. (2019) found significant relations between reports of parental psychological control and their romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance. Similarly, in a study conducted in Israel, Rousseau

and Scharf (2015) also found positive relations of PPC to young adults' attachment anxiety and avoidance in close relationships, although the relation to avoidance was nonsignificant (likely due to their small sample size, $N = 89$).

Although there are no studies that were identified in this literature review connecting parental psychological control to disorganized attachment in adulthood, Rholes et al. (2016) and Sheinbaum et al. (2020) found that childhood maltreatment predicted disorganized romantic attachment in adulthood. Because of the coercive and manipulative nature of PPC, in extreme cases, it may be considered a form of maltreatment. Furthermore, as discussed above, PPC has been shown to be related to both attachment anxiety and avoidance, and disorganized individuals may experience an inconsistent mixture of these two strategies along with an additional fear surrounding the attachment figure. Based on these two notions, it would seem plausible that this parental tactic would also predict disorganized attachment, in which the individual may experience general fear and distrust of romantic partners which conflicts with the nature and needs of the attachment system.

In sum, these previous findings suggest that parents' use of psychologically controlling tactics may contribute to their young adult children's organized romantic attachment insecurity, and that such relations likely hold across various cultures. Therefore, it is also important to assess whether PPC relates to disorganization surrounding romantic relationships in adulthood. Similarly, these findings also highlight the need to determine if parental psychological control is related to other potential negative outcomes in romantic relationships, such as the use of psychological aggression toward romantic partners.

Parental Psychological Control and IPV. It is likely that individuals who grow up in an environment where their parents use manipulative and coercive parenting strategies may use similar tactics in their own relationships (e.g., in relation to social learning theory; Bandura, 1977). Much research on the relation of PPC to aggression has been conducted on physical and relational aggression in adolescence. As such, previous studies have presented evidence that PPC is indeed related to these other types of aggression toward both peers and romantic partners in adolescents, (Gaertner et al., 2010; Ha et al., 2019; Leadbeater et al. 2008) and emerging adults (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Clark et al., 2015). There is also evidence of a relation between PPC and reactive aggression, suggesting that individuals who experience higher levels of psychological control react more aggressively in upsetting situations (Rathert et al., 2011). These findings further suggest the need to examine whether psychological control predicts other types of aggressive conflict tactics (i.e., psychological aggression) in emerging adulthood. Although current research is limited on the relation of PPC to psychological aggression, Choe et al. (2020) did not find a significant direct relation between perceived parental psychological control reported at age 16 and psychological aggression at 24, but they did find that parental psychological control was related to attachment anxiety and avoidance at age 18, which were then related to psychological aggression at 24. Additionally, Choe and Read (2019) found a significant positive relation of psychological control to general verbal aggression in a sample of college student emerging adults, although this aggression was not measured in the context of romantic relationships. Findings from Choe et al. (2020) suggest that there is not a direct relation of psychological control with psychological aggression eight years later, but cross-sectional

findings from Choe and Read (2019) suggest that PPC is related to general verbal aggression use. However, because of evidence which suggests PPC indeed is related to other types of aggression (physical, relational, reactive), and evidence that these forms of aggression are intercorrelated in adolescents (e.g., Card et al., 2008), and emerging adults (e.g., Saint-Eloi et al., 2019), it would still seem likely that PPC would also be related to perpetration of psychological aggression in romantic relationships.

As discussed previously, there is little previous research specifically examining PPC and psychological aggression in adulthood, and given the mixture of the current findings surrounding PPC and verbal aggression in adulthood, further investigation of this relation is warranted. Furthermore, findings suggesting that PPC is moderately positively related to higher levels of conflict in emerging adults' romantic relationships (Karre, 2015) highlight the importance of further investigating the potential role this parental factor plays in emerging adults' use of negative conflict tactics, particularly psychological aggression, in their romantic relationships.

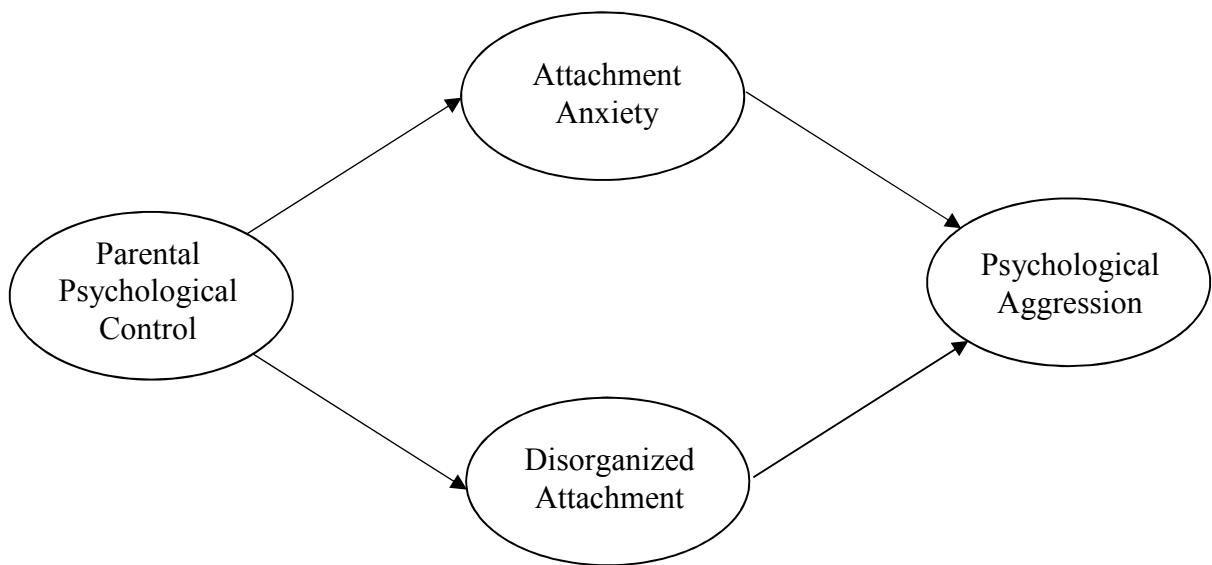
The Current Study

Previous research has documented the negative implications psychological aggression can have on romantic relationship quality (e.g., Sargent et al., 2016; Taft et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important to understand factors which may contribute to individuals' use of psychologically aggressive behaviors. Building on previous research, indicating relations between parental psychological control with romantic attachment, and other types of aggression, as well as relations between romantic attachment insecurity and psychological aggression, a mediation model is proposed (seen in Figure 1) in which parental psychological control positively predicts attachment anxiety and

disorganization, which will each uniquely predict perpetration of psychological aggression. Because avoidantly attached individuals may use conflict strategies primarily associated with withdrawal, only anxiety and disorganization were included in the current study. I hypothesize that the relation of parental psychological control to perpetration of psychological aggression will be statistically mediated by attachment insecurity. That is, insecure attachment will explain the relation of psychological control to psychological aggression.

Figure 1

Proposed model of parenting, romantic attachment, and psychological aggression.



Within this model, the following hypotheses will be examined:

H1: Retrospective reports of parental psychological control will be positively related to romantic attachment anxiety and disorganization.

H2: Retrospective reports of parental psychological control will be positively related to reports of psychological aggression.

H3: Attachment anxiety and disorganization will be positively related to psychological aggression.

H4: Attachment anxiety and disorganization will statistically mediate the relation of parental psychological control to psychological aggression.

Chapter II

Methods

Participants

Participants were 404 undergraduate students recruited from the psychology department subject pool at a midsized southeastern university. Some participants were also recruited using the university's Daily Digest email, which is a university-wide communication system. Students recruited through the participant subject pool received course credit for participating, and participants recruited through the Daily Digest were entered to win one of five \$20 gift cards. A total of 404 participants responded to the survey. Twenty-five were removed for completing less than 50% of the survey; fifty were removed for responding too quickly (less than five minutes total); fourteen were removed because they were duplicate submissions (the first submission was retained); finally, 16 were removed because they were not between the ages of 18-25. This resulted in a final sample size of 297 participants.

The final sample was 82% female, and was restricted to those between 18-25 (mean age of 19 (SD =1.62)); participants were 72% White, 17% African-American, 4% Asian, and 7% were of other racial/ethnic groups, The median relationship duration of participants was .92 years (SD = 1.38). Ninety-seven percent of participants said they were in a dating relationship; two percent said they were engaged; and one percent said they were married. Of those who were in dating relationships, 8% were cohabiting; fifty-seven (4/7) percent of those who were engaged were cohabiting; all married participants were cohabiting. Finally, 84% of the sample identified as heterosexual, followed by 12% bisexual, 3% lesbian/gay, and 1% other.

Procedure

Participants completed measures through Qualtrics assessing retrospective parental psychological control, attachment, and reports of psychological aggression perpetration toward partners within the last 30 days. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board before data collection began. Because of the sensitive nature of the measures utilized in this study, contact information for counseling services at the university and a link to mental health resources were provided to participants at the end of the questionnaires.

Measures

Parental Psychological Control (PPC)

Retrospective reports of parental psychological control were measured using the Psychological Control Scale (PCS; Barber, 1996). Participants were asked to think back to when they were younger and living with their parent/guardian(s). The PCS includes general aspects of psychological control such as guilt induction, shaming, and love withdrawal, and has items such as “My parents avoided looking at me when I disappointed them,” and “My parents were less friendly with me if I did not see things their way.” The scale includes eight items, and participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*). Barber (1996) provided initial evidence of reliability and validity for the PCS, and others have provided further evidence of reliability in emerging adult populations (e.g., McCormick et al., 2015; Winner & Nicholson, 2018). Internal consistency was excellent in the current study ($\alpha = .93$).

Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R).

Attachment anxiety was measured using the anxious attachment subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised (Fraley et al., 2000), which is 36-item measure for assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety subscale has 18 items. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Participants were asked to think about how they generally feel in romantic relationships, not just how they feel in their current relationship. The anxious attachment subscale includes items such as “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them,” and “My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away”; the avoidant subscale includes items such as “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.” and “I am nervous when partners get too close to me.” Previous research has supported the reliability and validity of the ECR-R for assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Fraley et al., 2000; Sibley et al., 2005). Internal consistency was excellent for both the anxiety ($\alpha = .95$) and avoidance ($\alpha = .95$) subscales.

Adult Disorganized Attachment Scale (ADA)

Disorganized attachment was assessed using the Adult Disorganized Attachment Scale (ADA), which is a 9-item measure designed by Paetzold et al. (2015) for assessing disorganized attachment in adulthood. The scale includes items such as “Fear is a common feeling in romantic relationships,” and “Compared with most people, I feel generally confused about romantic relationships.” Participants were asked to report how they generally feel in romantic relationships, not just how they feel in their current relationship. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with each item

on a 7-point ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). The original study assessing the ADA reported high internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). Paetzold et al. (2015) and Rholes et al. (2016) provided evidence of criterion-related validity showing relations with attachment anxiety and avoidance, childhood maltreatment, and anger and aggression toward romantic partners. Internal consistency was good in the current sample ($\alpha = .88$).

Psychological Aggression

The verbal/emotional abuse subscale of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (Wolfe et al., 2001) was used to assess psychological aggression. The subscale includes 10 statements such as “I insulted him/her with put downs,” “I brought up something bad that he/she had done in the past,” and “I threatened to end the relationship.” Although the scale was developed for use with adolescents, it has been successfully used in college student populations (Cascardi & Muzyczyn, 2015). Participants were asked to report how often they engaged in these behaviors with their partners within the last 30 days using a scale from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very Often*). Internal consistency was good in the current study ($\alpha = .90$).

Chapter III

Results

First, items were averaged to create an observed composite variable for each scale. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are listed below in Table 1. As expected, psychological control was significantly correlated with each dimension of attachment; furthermore, psychological control had a small, but nonsignificant relation with psychological aggression ($r = .11, p = .055$). Finally, each dimension, including avoidance, of attachment was significantly positively correlated with psychological aggression.

Table 1

Full sample descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (n = 297)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental Psychological Control	-	.41**	.23**	.21**	.11
2. Attachment Anxiety	-	-	.52**	.65**	.38**
3. Attachment Avoidance	-	-	-	.66**	.30**
4. Attachment Disorganization	-	-	-	-	.46**
5. Psychological Aggression	-	-	-	-	-
M	2.77	3.57	2.71	2.62	1.55
SD	1.35	1.38	1.16	1.20	.66

Notes. ** $p < .001$

There were no significant race or sex differences on any variables. To examine potential differences related to sexual orientation, participants were grouped by sexual orientation into heterosexual or sexual minority groups, and then t-tests were used to examine mean differences. Sexual minority participants reported higher levels of parental psychological control ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.37$) than heterosexual participants ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(295) = -3.72$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .58$ (95% confidence interval (CI) = $[-.89, -.27]$). Additionally, sexual minority participants reported lower levels of psychological aggression ($M = 1.34$, $SD = .38$) than heterosexual participants ($M = 1.59$, $SD = .70$), and $t(117.10) = 3.50$, $p < .001$. Adjusted degrees of freedom were used due to violation of equality of variances.

Further examination indicated differences in the relations between variables for heterosexual and sexual minority participants. For heterosexual participants, parental psychological control was positively related to psychological aggression ($r = .20$, $p = .002$) but negatively related for sexual minority participants ($r = -.28$, $p = .05$). Additionally, the relation of attachment dimensions to aggression was much different between the two groups - for anxiety, $r = .43$, $p < .001$ for heterosexual participants and $r = .02$, $p = .88$ for participants who were sexual minorities; for avoidance, $r = .35$, $p < .001$ for heterosexual participants and $r = .07$, $p = .63$ for sexual minority participants; finally, for disorganization, $r = .51$, $p < .001$ for heterosexual participants and $r = .17$, $p = .26$ for sexual minority participants. Due to the small number of sexual minority participants, it was concluded that there was inadequate power to test sexual orientation as a potential moderator of these relations and therefore the full model was analyzed for heterosexual

participants (n = 247) only. See Table 2 for the full correlation matrix for the final sample of heterosexual participants.

Mediation Model

Structural equation modeling with AMOS was employed to assess overall model fit. Items for each scale were randomly divided into three parcels such that each latent variable has three observed variable indicators. Due to the finding that parental psychological control was indeed significantly related to avoidance, and avoidance also

Table 2

Heterosexual participants descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (n = 247)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental Psychological Control	-	.41*	.24*	.22*	.20*
2. Attachment Anxiety	-	-	.49*	.65*	.43*
3. Attachment Avoidance	-	-	-	.64*	.35*
4. Attachment Disorganization	-	-	-	-	.51*
5. Psychological Aggression	-	-	-	-	-
M	2.63	3.52	2.71	2.59	1.59
SD	1.3	1.38	1.11	1.20	.70

Notes. * $p < .01$

being significantly related to aggression, avoidance was added to the final model.

Therefore, parental psychological control had two three-item indicators, and one two-item indicator; anxious and avoidant attachment each had three six-item indicators, and

disorganized had three three-item indicators; and psychological aggression had two three-item indicators and one four-item indicator. Overall model fit was assessed via the likelihood ratio statistic, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Values of above .95 for CFI and TLI, and below .08 for RMSEA and SRMR were used to indicate acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Because avoidance was related to parental psychological control and psychological aggression, I opted to include it in the final model. To account for skewness in the variables, standard errors and confidence intervals were calculated using bias-corrected bootstrapping.

The proposed model demonstrated an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 129.97, p < .001$, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .05 (.03, .07), SRMR = .04, without any modifications, and accounted for 34% of the variation in psychological aggression. Parental psychological control was significantly related to attachment anxiety ($b = .55$, SE = .09, 95% CI = [.39, .73], $R^2 = .19$), avoidance ($b = .23$, SE = .05, 95% CI = [.09, .36], $R^2 = .06$), and disorganization ($b = .22$, SE = .05, 95% CI = [.10, .36], $R^2 = .06$), providing support for hypothesis 1. However, with all dimensions of attachment in the model, only disorganization emerged as a unique predictor of psychological aggression ($b = .33$, SE = .10, 95% CI = [.15, .53]). Anxiety ($b = .06$, SE = .05, 95% CI = [-.04, .16]) and avoidance ($b = -.05$, SE = .05, 95% CI = [-.15, .06]) did not add predict a significant amount of unique variation in aggression after controlling for disorganization. As such, hypothesis 3 was only partially supported. Finally, only the indirect effect of parental psychological control on psychological aggression via disorganization was significant ($b = .07$, SE = .03, 95% CI = [.03, .16]), providing partial support for hypothesis 4.

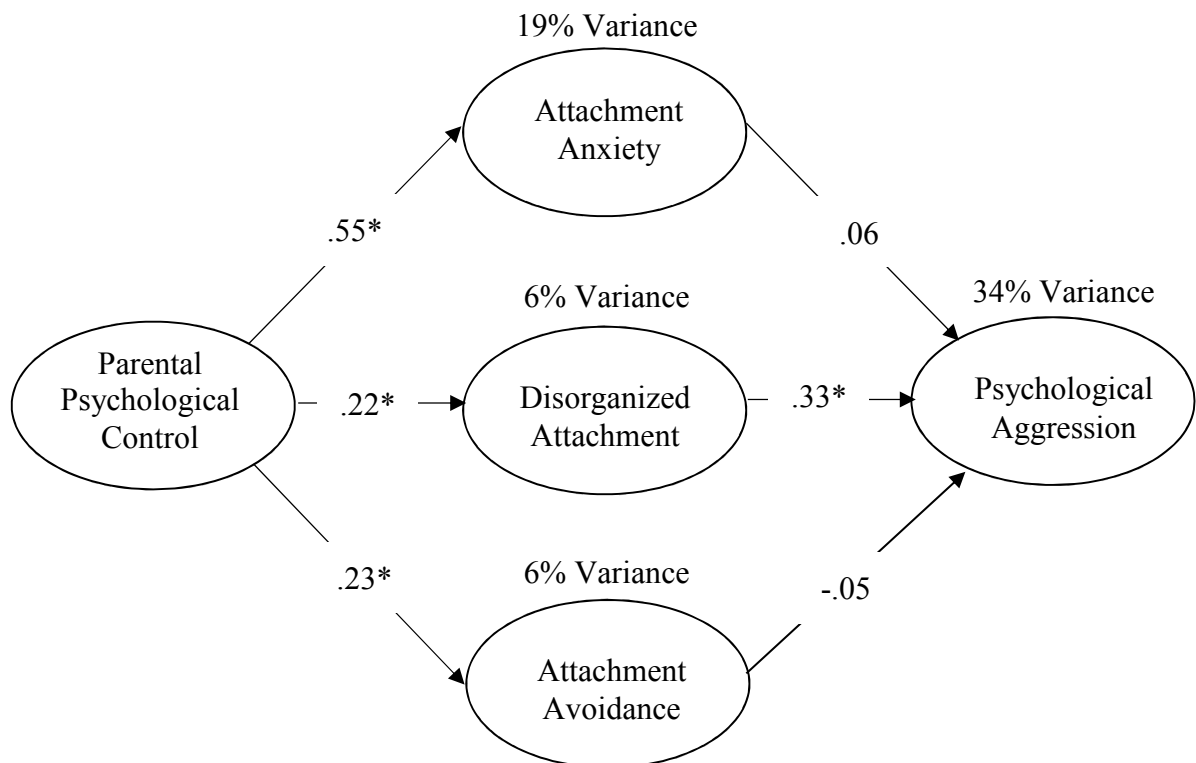
Chapter IV

Discussion

In the current study, the hypothesis that attachment anxiety and disorganization would statistically mediate the relation of parental psychological control to psychological aggression perpetration in heterosexual participants was examined. Although the proposed model fit the data, findings indicated that psychological control was correlated with anxiety, avoidance, and disorganization, which were each significantly correlated with psychological aggression in bivariate correlations, though only the indirect effect through disorganization contributed unique variance when accounting for all dimensions

Figure 2

Final model of parenting, attachment, and psychological aggression



Notes. * $p < .05$. Covariances were allowed between each attachment dimension

of attachment in a latent variable model, providing only partial support for the proposed model. In addition, it was found that, in the simple correlations, the relations were present in only heterosexual participants, with the relation of parental psychological control to aggression being negative for participants who were sexual minorities.

As hypothesized, parental psychological control was significantly related to attachment anxiety and disorganization. As discussed previously, the relation to anxiety has been consistently demonstrated across studies (e.g., Choe et al., 2020; Díez et al., 2019; Rousseau & Scharf, 2015). Parents' use of psychological control may establish in children the belief that love is conditional and contingent upon the parents' happiness and satisfaction with the child, fostering a sense of anxiety within close relationships - particularly romantic relationships in which partners serve as the secure base in adulthood. The relation of psychological control to disorganization is new and has not been established in prior research. Perhaps, parents' use of psychologically controlling tactics may instill a distinct form of fear in some children by which the result is incoherency in attachment strategies and distrust of attachment figures. At high levels, psychological control would likely be considered child maltreatment. If, when the child needs the parent, the parent engages in maltreatment, it would seem plausible that the child then would develop a conditioned fear surrounding the parent and a distrust of the parent as a safe base. Finally, this anxiety, or general fear and distrust of others may then spill over into future relationship representations, as evidenced by research supporting some consistency of attachment representations across the lifespan (Jarnecke & South,

2013). Future researchers and clinicians should pay close attention to controlling behaviors which may negatively affect psychological development, as childhood representations may grow into adulthood and negatively impact interpersonal functioning.

Findings for Participants Who are Sexual Minorities

Findings based on the small sample of participants who identified as sexual minorities indicated notable differences on variables of interest. Each of these findings must be interpreted in the context in which they were tested. For example, levels of psychological control were much higher for sexual minority participants. This finding aligns with prior research on minority stressors, including invalidating environments, which may contribute to negative mental health outcomes for sexual minority people (e.g., Cardona et al., 2021). Findings also indicated differences among patterns of relations between attachment and aggression, although sample size was too small to further explore these patterns. However, given these findings, future researchers should pay particular attention to potentially invalidating family environments when examining outcomes for individuals who are sexual minorities.

Attachment and Psychological Aggression

In the current study, after controlling for disorganization, anxiety and avoidance did not contribute any unique variance to psychological aggression, lending the indirect effects nonsignificant as well. This finding is particularly interesting. Perhaps the sample size was inadequate to test these relations in a singular model, given their moderate relatedness to one another. Alternatively, the fear captured in disorganization is particularly powerful in predicting aggression and this fear and distrust of romantic

partners may be the salient force in psychologically aggressive behavior toward partners. Given that the typical purpose of psychological aggression is to exert control, individuals who experience fear in romantic relationships may use aggressive tactics to control the partner to avoid perceived danger or uncertainty (Paetzold et al., 2015). If this is true, targeting this general sense of fear and distrust may be a particularly useful intervention for reducing aggressive tendencies for those with more disorganized attachment patterns. However, although the relation of anxiety and avoidance were nonsignificant in the final model, these may also be important factors for clinicians to target. It may also be important to note that, although anxiety and avoidance did not contribute unique variance to psychological aggression, the variance shared between the dimensions of attachment is likely still an important factor.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the findings from the current study provide important direction for future research, they are not without limitations. Primarily, the use of a cross-sectional data set to examine a mediation model does not provide evidence of a mediated relation. Although the study provided evidence that (at least disorganized) attachment may act as one explanation for the relation of psychological control to psychological aggression, more advanced longitudinal evidence will be needed to establish a formal mediated model. Moreover, the findings should be interpreted in the context of the largely white, primarily women, and primarily young college student sample. Because the sample was overwhelmingly women, findings may represent the patterns for women. These findings will need to be further explored in samples that are more representative in gender. However, prior research has provided evidence that the ECR-R demonstrates invariance

across males and females (Gray & Dunlop, 2019). Nonetheless, future research should strive to use more diverse samples in terms of age, ethnic backgrounds, and gender - future research should also seek to test this model in a sample where differences between heterosexual and sexual minority participants can be more thoroughly examined. Finally, levels of aggression were low in the current sample, perhaps introducing a restriction of range problem where relations may be smaller than if the levels of aggression had more variation. Future researchers should strive to gather participants who may have more varying levels of aggression perpetration.

In addition to methodology limitations, each attachment dimension was moderately correlated with the others, introducing the question of whether one can adequately examine the unique contribution of attachment styles to outcomes when examining attachment in a continuous manner. Perhaps, future researchers might seek to parse out this potential collinearity problem by performing more advanced analyses, such as latent profile analysis (e.g., Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021) to examine the relation of attachment to relevant outcomes in a more person-centered manner.

Although the study had these limitations, findings were nonetheless noteworthy. Most notably, only disorganized attachment served as a significant mediator of the relation of psychological control to psychological aggression. It seems as if the distinct fear captured by the ADA is particularly powerful at predicting aggressive behavior. Future researchers should make efforts to understand the uniqueness of fear in romantic relationships and the potential effect it has on engaging in aggressive behavior. Alternatively, future researchers should seek to clarify if prior relationship violence precedes fear which then contributes to future aggression. This clarification will provide

necessary insight into the exact relations between these variables. Additionally, researchers should continue to improve the measurement of attachment disorganization in adulthood to continue exploring the potential contributions this dimension of attachment may make to romantic outcomes.

Conclusions

The findings from the current study provide important knowledge to our understanding of developmental correlates of intimate partner violence perpetration. Specifically, those who experience higher levels of parental psychological may engage in more psychological aggression in their romantic relationships, partly due to their higher levels of attachment insecurity. Understanding predictors of intimate partner violence is essential in the prevention of violence.

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Appendix

IRB Form

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD August 9, 2021

Principal Investigator: Lisa Turner, Ph.D.
IRB # and Title: IRB PROTOCOL: 21-315
[1779870-1] Parenting, Attachment, and Romantic Relationships
Status: APPROVED Review Type: Exempt Review
Approval Date: August 9, 2021 Submission Type: New Project
Initial Approval: August 9, 2021 Expiration Date:
Review Category: 45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2): Research that only includes interaction involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording):

ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside of the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

This panel, operating under the authority of the DHHS Office for Human Research and Protection, assurance number FWA 00001602, and IRB Database #00000286 or #00011574, has reviewed the submitted materials for the following:

1. *Protection of the rights and the welfare of human subjects involved.*
2. *The methods used to secure and the appropriateness of informed consent.*
3. *The risk and potential benefits to the subject.*

The regulations require that the investigator not initiate any changes in the research without prior IRB approval, except where necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the human subjects, and that **all problems involving risks and adverse events be reported to the IRB immediately!**

Subsequent supporting documents that have been approved will be stamped with an IRB approval and expiration date (if applicable) on every page. Copies of the supporting documents must be utilized with the current IRB approval stamp unless consent has been waived.

Notes:

Biographical Sketch

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