Associations Between Working Models of Attachment and Conflict Management Behavior in Romantic Couples

Gary Creasey
Illinois State University

The goal of this study was to specify relations between internal working models of attachment (IWM) and conflict management behaviors in a sample of young adults involved in romantic relationships. One hundred forty-five romantic couples were recruited to address this goal. All participants were administered the Adult Attachment Interview (C. George, N. Kaplan, & M. Main, 1996) and observed across 2 experimental conditions designed to simulate waiting room and conflict management contexts. As expected, individual differences in IWM predicted positive and negative conflict management behavior. The IWM of the young women predicted more positive behavior across interactions, whereas the IWM of the young men predicted more negative behavior in the conflict management condition. Individuals who were unresolved regarding loss or trauma and who displayed considerable attachment insecurity were particularly vulnerable to more negative behavior, particularly in terms of exhibiting controlling behavior.

Understanding processes that underlie conflict management problems in dating couples on college campuses is important to counseling professionals. Although all romantic couples occasionally quarrel and disagree, a number of studies indicate that serious conflict management problems in dating relationships may spark psychological distress, self-esteem difficulties, and academic problems (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that problems in romantic relationships are often a major reason for self-referrals to counseling centers on college campuses (Creasey, Kershaw & Boston, 1999).

Conflict management difficulties also represent a future concern for young adults. Researchers have documented that married couples who engage in corrosive management behaviors tinged with negative affect (e.g., contempt, belligerence) are more likely to divorce than couples who use more positive conflict management behavior (e.g., humor; Gottman, 1993, 1994). Because conflict management behaviors exhibited in early dating relationships may predict the development of similar behavior in later romantic relationships (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Martin, 1990), intervening with individuals earlier in the romantic relationship process represents an exciting direction for prevention specialists.

Theoretically, adult attachment problems, marked by insecure internal working models of attachment (IWM), represent a possible antecedent to conflict management difficulties (cf. Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Lopez & Brennan, 2000). Internal working models of attachment are conceptualized as the adult’s current state of mind regarding his or her relationship with caregivers and are theorized to provide the individual a set of rules for the direction of affect, thinking, and behavior in social interactions with attachment figures (Bremerton & Munnholland, 1999). Although early emotional relationships with caregivers are one force behind the development of IWM, it is assumed that attachment representations are refined throughout childhood through changes in the caregiving environment (Bowby, 1969/1982).

The primary methodology to assess internal working models of attachment has historically been the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996), a 20-item protocol designed to assess the adult’s state of mind regarding attachment experiences. Individual differences in adult attachment classifications exist and are coded primarily through analyzing the respondent’s linguistic expression throughout the interview procedure. Adults can be classified as having secure (e.g., open and collaborative during interview); dismissing (e.g., blocks and evades discussion during interview); or preoccupied (e.g., angry or fearful feelings regarding attachment figures) IWM (Main, 1996; Main & Goldwyn, 1994). Although the aforementioned classifications are conceptualized as organized styles of attachment, some adults display signs of attachment disorganization. Adults possessing unresolved or disorganized IWM demonstrate striking lapses in the monitoring of reasoning or discourse while discussing potentially traumatic events. Theoretically, these adults remain traumatized regarding loss or abuse experiences, resulting in active, parallel memory systems (e.g., “Dad has been dead for 10 years, God rest his soul, he thinks I should go to law school”) or brief entries into “peculiar, compartmentalized states of mind” (Hesse, 1999, p. 405).

Because IWM are theorized to influence the development of adult intimate relationships (Bowby, 1988), counseling professionals have developed an interest in the theory’s applicability for understanding relationships between adults and their attachment problems in early dating relationships.
figures (e.g., parents, romantic partners, therapists; Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Mallinckrodt, 1995; Pistole & Watkins, 1995; Slade, 1999). In particular, attachment theory may be highly applicable to the study of adult–romantic partner conflict resolution because a basic premise is that IWM underlie and guide specific affect and behavior during interactions with attachment figures. This assertion is compelling when one considers that children, adolescents, and adults with insecure IWM have difficulties with affect regulation and social skills (Cassidy, 1994; Fuendeling, 1998; Kobak & Sceery, 1988), suggesting that such individuals might have fundamental difficulties with conflict management. In addition, because individual differences in attachment representations are theoretically more pronounced when relationship security is challenged or threatened (e.g., Bowlby, 1980), interadult conflict exchanges may provide an important context for the activation and expression of IWM.

Thus, when contrasting the four IWM, secure individuals should display the most optimal behavior in romantic relationships. Due to a high regard for themselves and others, and their ability to regulate negative emotions with attachment figures (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Kobak & Sceery, 1988), secure individuals would less likely display the types of negative behaviors (e.g., contempt, belligerence) that are routinely uncovered in distressed romantic relationships. Thus, dismissing and preoccupied individuals should display less optimal behavior during conflict negotiation than secure individuals. In contrasting preoccupied and dismissing individuals, one might expect preoccupied individuals to harbor the most difficulties. Preoccupied individuals are thought to have a heavy investment in maintaining relationships because such maintenance is an ultimate validation of the self; thus, these individuals are often hypervigilant regarding the availability of attachment figures (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). This state of mind is thought to activate conflicting thoughts and feelings regarding a history of unpredictable relationships and lead to intense hostility when distress is encountered within a relationship (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

Although theory exists explaining associations between parent unresolved attachment status and the development of disorganized infant attachment (e.g., Main & Hesse, 1990), there is less speculation regarding how this working model of attachment may influence adult–adult relationships. However, unresolved IWM might present special difficulties for adult attachment relationships. In particular, these individuals may display more controlling behavior in relationships than individuals who exhibit organized attachment insecurity (i.e., dismissing or preoccupied). Although associations between unresolved attachment and controlling behavior in adult populations exists theoretically (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999), research involving younger populations consistently has documented strong relationships between disorganized attachment status in children and the ontogeny of controlling behavior with both parents and peers (Main & Cassidy, 1988; Wartner, Grossman, Frenmmer-Bombick, & Suess, 1994). Whether or not a controlling behavioral style is carried forward into emerging relationships during young adulthood is debatable; however, unresolved adults may use controlling behavior as a coping mechanism to prevent/ regulate negative affect (e.g., fear) in attachment relationships. The use of controlling behavior might represent an important option to an unresolved adult, because it is theorized that impending relationship distress and failure activates strong feelings of futile anger, fear, and confusion in these individuals that may result in a breakdown in cognitive–behavioral organization (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999).

However, not all unresolved individuals are at risk for difficulties. According to attachment experts, unresolved IWM occur when the adult is momentarily seized by heightened emotions and/or intruding memories of past traumatic experiences (Hesse, 2000; Main & Hesse, 1990). Furthermore, unresolved IWM do not constantly invade thinking and behavior; rather, these IWM are activated during times of intense distress that overwhelm one’s typical, organized (i.e., secure, dismissing, preoccupied) manner for coping with attachment distress. Thus, an unresolved adult can display considerable attachment security or insecurity (dismissing, preoccupied) in thinking as well. It is interesting that parents who display temporary unresolved thinking while discussing previous traumatic experiences, yet display secure/autonomous thinking about other attachment experiences, display more optimal parenting behaviors than unresolved adults who display insecure thinking (Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 1999). Thus, an underlying secure attachment organization may serve as a buffer between unresolved IWM and problematic behavior (cf. Hesse, 1999, 2000). This very important premise will be investigated in the current study.

### Adult Attachment Research

Empirical research supports the theoretical contention that IWM are related to functioning in romantic relationships. Those who conceptualize adult attachment as a broad construct that captures thinking across a variety of emerging adult relationships (i.e., attachment styles; e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) have found that individuals who endorse secure attachment orientations (i.e., a general impression that one can trust other adults) are more likely to indicate higher levels of intimacy in adult relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), more favorable expectancies regarding partner motives (Feeney, 1998), better relationship quality and accommodation strategies (Collins & Read, 1990; Pistole, 1989; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995), longer romantic relationship length (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and more relationship stability (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) than their counterparts with insecure IWM. Thus, one might indirectly posit that if secure IWM were related to relationship success, then secure attachment representations would also be related to optimal conflict management behavior in romantic relationships.

A small number of studies have linked attachment measures with direct observations of adult conflict management behaviors. In two studies, researchers using a sample of 27 married couples correlated IWM obtained from the Adult Attachment Interview (George et al., 1996) with observations of marital behavior during interaction tasks involving both parents and a child (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996). The results indicated that men with insecure IWM displayed more negative affect and engaged in more conflict with their spouse than men with secure IWM. Interactions were more strained in situations when both adults had insecure IWM, suggesting that a partner’s IWM may moderate the effects of his/her partner’s attachment representations. Unfortunately, the small sample size prevented direct comparisons between adults with...
different IWM (i.e., secure vs. dismissing vs. preoccupied vs. unresolved).

Two research teams (Gao, Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1997; Kobak & Hazan, 1991) examined relations between adult IWM and couple interactive behavior during a problem-solving task. Husbands and wives with secure IWM were more supportive and less rejecting of their spouses during these structured interactions than were those with insecure IWM. Simpson et al. (1996) had respondents evaluate perceptions of attachment behaviors in romantic relationships (e.g., “I don’t like people getting too close to me”) and found that general insecurity in such relationships (avoidance in men, ambivalence in women) predicted conflict management difficulties with romantic partners during a problem-solving task. Finally, Paley, Cox, Burchinal, and Payne (1999) documented that adults with secure IWM displayed fewer problems managing conflict in a problem-solving task than did insecure adults. It is interesting that preoccupied and dismissing adults displayed conflict management problems with equal frequency.

Although the aforementioned research has provided initial evidence that IWM are associated with conflict management behavior, we hoped this investigation would provide important data that have been largely missing from existing studies. For example, although researchers have documented relations between perceived attachment orientations (e.g., attachment styles) and romantic relationship functioning using paper-and-pencil methods (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson et al., 1996), less work has documented associations between an adult’s state of mind regarding attachment and observations of romantic relationship behavior.

We also expected that the present study, would provide more detailed findings (because of the relatively large sample size) than other studies that have relied on attachment interview methods. In particular, because many AAI-based studies involving romantic couples contained small sample sizes, there is little information on how unresolved attachment status may influence relationship behavior. This limitation is unfortunate, given the fact that unresolved or fearful attachment representations have recently been tied to extreme relationship problems (i.e., violence; Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchison, 1997). In addition, beyond documenting possible differences between young adults with unresolved and insecure IWM on conflict management behaviors, a central goal of the present study is to specify how unresolved individuals may differ in terms of this behavior (i.e., through the use of more controlling behavior).

Method

Participants

Young adults (M age = 19.98 years, range = 18–25, SD = 2.62; 87% Caucasian, 9% African American, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Asian, 1% unknown) who were involved in heterosexual romantic relationships and attending a large university were recruited for this study through flyers posted across campus and distributed through residential advisors. The flyers provided a general description of the study and outlined the investigator’s interest in recruiting couples involved in steady romantic relationships. On average, the couples (N = 145) had been involved in a romantic relationship for almost 2 years (M = 20 months; SD = 15.14; range = 3–61 months).

Procedures

Interested couples were invited to a research laboratory. On arrival, the couple was greeted by an experimenter and provided a general description of the study’s purpose. After signing consent forms, the couple was separated and each partner was administered the Adult Attachment Interview (George et al., 1996) by trained research assistants. After completion
of this audiotaped interview, the couple was reunited and asked to remain in a room for 15 min, “interacting as you normally do.” After this waiting room condition, each member of the couple, in the presence of the research assistant, independently completed a short inventory of common problems in romantic relationships (Gottman, 1996). This inventory prompts individuals to rate the frequency and intensity of common problems in romantic relationships (e.g., money, relatives, friends). After completing this inventory, the couple was encouraged to move toward conflict resolution regarding their top two relationship difficulties for 15 min. The experimenter then exited the room. All couple interactions were videotaped through a one-way mirror across both experimental conditions; all couples were informed of this methodology.

As part of a larger study on relationship development, the partner who initiated initial interest in this research was also invited to complete a large questionnaire packet approximately 2 weeks before the aforementioned interview/observational procedures. This “target participant” was usually the female partner (n = 105). During this phase of the study, the target participant completed the Managing Affect and Differences Scale (MADS; Arellano & Markman, 1995) to provide a gauge of how well the couple managed conflict in general.

Measures

Working models of attachment. Partners individually completed the 20-item Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al., 1996). The AAI assesses processing of attachment-relevant information and focuses on violations in discourse in response to past (e.g., “Provide five adjectives to describe your childhood relationship with your father”), current (e.g., “How do your relationships with parents affect your current relationships?”), and future (e.g., “What do you hope your children will learn from you?”) attachment experiences. The focus of the AAI is the respondent’s current state of mind regarding emotional relationships, and the interviewer makes no attempts to recover past experiences with family members. Rather, coders note violations in discourse (e.g., indicating a parent was supportive and offering no evidence as to why; thought lapses during interview; passive or angry speech); reactions to separation, loss, rejection, and abuse; and perceived value of attachment experiences and how they relate to current development. The AAI has weathered numerous reliability and validity tests, and classifications garnered from this interview are largely unrelated to verbal abilities, autobiographical memory, intelligence, and personality measures (Hesse, 1999; van IJzendoorn, 1995).

The AAI coding scheme yields three organized adult attachment classifications (secure, dismissing, preoccupied) based on probable experience (loving, rejecting, role-reversing, neglecting, and pressure to achieve) and state of mind (idealization, lack of recall, involving anger, thought passivity, fear of loss, derogation, metacognitive monitoring, and coherence of mind and transcript) continuous scales (Main & Goldwyn, 1994). The AAI classifications are primarily derived from the state-of-mind scales. Probable experiences and general respondent impressions (e.g., “I had a bad childhood”) are noted yet are not an integral part of the classification system.

Individuals who are classified as having secure IWM are coherent and collaborative throughout the interview and can discuss both positive and negative experiences in an objective manner. Dismissing individuals provide highly positive, generalized representations of attachment experiences, which are unsupported or even contradicted throughout the interview. These individuals are often dismissive of unfavorable attachment experiences (“Mom used to ignore me, but it was for my own good”). Preoccupied IWM represent individuals who provide excessive discourse when describing attachment experiences (many times forgetting the original line of questioning) and show strong negative (e.g., anger), often entangled, responses when discussing experiences (Main & Goldwyn, 1994).

After the aforementioned classifications are derived, interviews can also be classified as Unresolved/Disorganized (U/d) with respect to past abuse or loss, in which respondents display (a) major lapses in the monitoring of reasoning surrounding the loss or trauma, such as fears of being taken over mentally by an abusive attachment figure; (b) highly incoherent speech; (c) disbelief that maltreatment or loss has occurred; and/or (d) lapses in monitoring of discourse, such as unusual attention to detail of loss or maltreatment, sudden changes of topic, or sudden invasions of other topics of information (Main & Goldwyn, 1994). This classification is derived after rating two continuous scales: Unresolved Loss and Unresolved Abuse.

In addition, on the basis of the participant’s responses throughout the interview, the AAI scoring protocol further stipulates that individuals assigned the U/d classification should be designated a best-fitting three-way (i.e., secure, preoccupied, dismissing) classification.

Research assistants were trained regarding interview administration in the spirit of AAI protocol (George et al., 1996). All audiotaped interviews were transcribed and later coded by Gary Creasey (Illinois State University) or Doug Teti (University of Maryland, Baltimore), who had received formal AAI coding/classification training from Mary Main and Eric Hesse (University of California, Berkeley). Both coders were certified as expert coders by the trainers and in the present investigation achieved acceptable interrater agreement across 30 cases (κ = .80 for four-way classification system).

Interactive behavior. Interactive behavior across the experimental conditions was coded using Gottman’s (1996) Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF), which identifies positive and negative emotional behavioral patterns that predict relationship demise and dissolution. The SPAFF incorporates facial expression, voice tone and content, and body gestures as relevant information to guide coding decisions. Specific affective behaviors derived from the procedures described below have been shown to strongly predict divorce (Gottman, 1994, 1996). The following negative codes were rated as follows: (1) Contempt (put-downs, mockery); (2) Belligerence (limit testing); (3) Domineering (lecturing, ultimatums); (4) Stonewalling (inattention); (5) Defensiveness (making excuses); (6) Sadness; and (7) Anger. The system also yields the following positive codes: (1) Validation; (2) Affection/Empathy; (3) Interest; (4) Surprise/Excitement; and (5) Shared Humor. Positive and negative codes can be summed to form aggregate behavior/affective total scores or used separately (e.g., Gottman, 1993).

In the present study, aggregate (total positive or negative) codes were used in most analyses. However, in selected analyses, the negative codes of contempt, domineering, and defensiveness were used. The choice to limit analyses to these select codes was based on several factors. Beyond limiting the number of statistical tests, these specific behaviors theoretically communicate different intentions in relationships. Contempt is provocative in nature and is meant to directly attack a partner’s personality. Defensiveness is primarily used to deflect responsibility. Domineering behaviors are attempts to actually shut down or control the conversation of the partner (e.g., “Stop it,” “You are wrong, dead wrong,” “Shut up, now!”; Gottman, 1994, 1996).

Research assistants (graduate students, not the AAI coders) were trained as coders in the following manner. First, raters were provided a copy of the coding manual, descriptions and examples of the codes, and practice tapes. Coders rated a series of test tapes and transcripts of couples attempting conflict management (supplied by Gottman). In terms of discriminating positive, negative, and neutral codes, the raters achieved acceptable interrater reliability when comparing their judgments with Gottman’s ratings (median κ = .83) as well as in conjunction with one another (median κ = .85). In addition, because aggregate scores were used for the three aforementioned specific codes, interrater reliability was computed for the domineering (κ = .60), contempt (κ = .78), and defensiveness (κ = .82) codes.

To determine if our behavior observations were related to subjective impressions of how the couple generally resolved conflict, one member of the couple (see Procedures) also completed the Managing Affect and Differences Scale (MADS; Arellano & Markman, 1995). This scale assesses positive (e.g., validation; editing) and negative (e.g., negative con-
lict escalation) conflict tactics used (or at least reported) by romantic partners and has been shown to discriminate satisfied and dissatisfied marital couples. Both the positive and negative scales of the MADS were summed and correlated with the aggregated positive and negative conflict behaviors we observed in the conflict management condition. Partners who reported using more negative conflict management tactics during altercations also displayed more negative behavior during the observed couple interactions ($r = .28, p < .001$). Likewise, individuals who reported using more positive tactics during disagreements displayed more positive behavior during the observations ($r = .19, p < .05$). Thus, the behavioral observations were significantly related to how the couple resolved disagreements in general.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Attachment classifications assessed with the Adult Attachment Interview are contained in Table 1 by gender.\footnote{1 Data using the forced three-way classifications, as well as a combined unresolved category, are available on request.} The proportion of participants represented by the AAI classifications was very similar to percentages obtained in other investigations involving college students and young adults. For example, in their meta-analysis of four major studies involving similar samples, van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996) indicated that about $48\%$ of the youth across the selected studies were secure (compared with $40\%$ in the present sample), whereas about $20\%$ were unresolved (compared with $26\%$ in the present sample). Likewise, Hesse and van IJzendoorn (1999) documented, in a sample of $140$ Berkeley undergraduates, that $41\%$ of their sample were secure (compared with $40\%$ in the present study), and $20\%$ were unresolved (compared with $26\%$ in the present sample). In addition, like Hesse and van IJzendoorn (1999), it was documented that more men than women were dismissing; however, overall, men and women were not significantly different when all of the attachment classifications were considered, $\chi^2(4, N = 290) = 6.70, p = .15$.

Positive and negative behaviors across and within the experimental conditions were summed and presented in Tables 2 and 3. These descriptive statistics are presented by gender.

Predicting Positive and Negative Behavior by IWM

The first analyses tested several specific hypotheses. Secure individuals were expected to display more positive and less negative behavior than insecure (preoccupied and dismissing) participants, and preoccupied individuals were expected to display more negative and less positive behaviors when contrasted to the dismissing participants. In addition, we predicted that unresolved/insecure individuals would display more positive and less negative behavior than unresolved/insecure participants. The experimental condition was expected to moderate relations between working models of attachment and positive and negative behavior. These initial hypotheses were tested separately for the young men and women.\footnote{2 Because of concerns that individual behavior could be affected by the partner’s IWM or behavior, we conducted several supplemental analyses. First, we conducted an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) series in which the partner’s IWM was treated as a covariate. In terms of using a continuous measure of partner IWM, the AAI Coherency scale was used as a central covariate. The Coherence of Mind scale (scored $1$ to $9$; $1 = \text{very incoherent}; 9 = \text{very coherent}$) is the overall state-of-mind score with respect to attachment (Main & Goldwyn, 1994, p. 91) and is scored after scoring and evaluating the other state-of-mind scales (e.g., idealization, preoccupation). This scale determines individual placement in secure or insecure attachment classifications. For both men and women, the ANCOVAs yielded essentially the same pattern of results as the ANOVA series. We also conducted another ANOVA series (in terms of predicting both male and female behavior) in which the partner’s behavior was treated as a within-subject variable. Again, similar results were obtained. Because both supplemental analyses yielded almost identical results when compared with the original analysis, we chose to represent our results using the less complex analyses.}

In terms of predicting male positive behavior, a $5$ (Male IWM) $\times 2$ (Experimental Condition) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. This analysis yielded a predictable main effect for experimental condition, $F(1, 40) = 56.3, p < .0001$, and a main effect for IWM, $F(4, 140) = 2.66, p < .05$. No significant interaction was determined, $F(4, 140) = .823, p > .05$. To test the study hypotheses, we deconstructed this significant IWM main effect using single degrees-of-freedom planned comparisons. In terms of predicting total male positive behaviors across the experimental conditions, secure men were not significantly different than their preoccupied and dismissing counterparts, $t(140) = .68, p = .50$ (see Table 2). In addition, preoccupied men were similar to dismissing men in terms of exhibiting positive behavior, $t(140) = -12, p = .90$. Finally, unresolved/secure men were not significantly different than unresolved/insecure men regarding this positive behavior, $t(140) = .82, p = .42$; however, unresolved/insecure men did display less positive behavior than insecure men, $t(140) = -1.99, p < .05$.

In terms of male negative behavior, a $5$ (Male IWM) $\times 2$ (Experimental Condition) ANOVA revealed significant main effects for experimental condition, $F(1, 140) = 173.6, p < .0001$, and IWM, $F(4, 140) = 6.98, p < .0001$. In addition, and as predicted, a significant IWM $\times$ Experimental Condition interaction was also noted, $F(4, 140) = 6.09, p < .0001$. As hypothesized, an inspection of the means determined that associations between IWM and male behavior were most notable in the conflict condition (see Table 2 for means). To test the study hypotheses, we conducted planned contrasts to test variability in male negative behavior within this condition. As hypothesized, secure men displayed less negative behavior in the conflict management condition than preoccupied and dismissing men, $t(140) = -1.97, p < .05$. Contrary to our predictions, preoccupied men ($M = 46.3$) did

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAI classification</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M (SD)$</td>
<td>$M (SD)$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>$55 (38%)$</td>
<td>$62 (43%)$</td>
<td>$117 (40%)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>$48 (33%)$</td>
<td>$33 (23%)$</td>
<td>$81 (28%)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>$6 (4%)$</td>
<td>$12 (8%)$</td>
<td>$18 (6%)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresolved/secure</td>
<td>$13 (9%)$</td>
<td>$19 (13%)$</td>
<td>$32 (11%)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresolved/insecure</td>
<td>$23 (16%)$</td>
<td>$19 (13%)$</td>
<td>$42 (15%)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For both men and women, $n_s = 145$. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview.
not display more negative behavior than dismissing men, t(140) = 1.89, p < .10. In fact, there was a trend for dismissing men (M = 63) to display more negativity. As predicted, unresolved/secure men (M = 94.8) displayed more negative behavior in the conflict condition when contrasted to unresolved/secure men (M = 68.9), t(140) = 2.18, p < .05, as well as men who were insecure, t(140) = 2.30, p < .05.

We conducted a similar set of analyses to determine relations between female IWM and positive and negative behavior within the experimental conditions. In terms of predicting female positive behavior, significant main effects for experimental condition, F(1, 140) = 68.45, p < .0001, and IWM, F(4, 140) = 6.77, p < .0001, were noted. The Experimental Condition × IWM interaction was not significant, F(4, 140) = .87, p > .05. In terms of predicting total positive behavior across the experimental conditions (see Table 3), contrast analyses revealed that secure women displayed more positive behavior than dismissing and preoccupied women, t(140) = 4.10, p < .0001. In addition, there was a trend for preoccupied women to display less positive behavior when compared with their dismissing counterparts, t(140) = 1.72, p < .10. As predicted, unresolved/secure women (M = 91) displayed much more positive behavior across the experimental conditions when contrasted to unresolved/secure women (M = 54), t(140) = 3.00, p < .001. However, unresolved/secure women were not significantly different from insecure women in terms of positive behavior, t(140) = 1.48, p = .65.

In terms of predicting negative behavior, the ANOVA revealed significant main effects for experimental condition, F(1, 140) = 31.41, p < .0001, and IWM, F(1, 140) = 4.56, p < .01. In addition, and as predicted, a significant Experimental Condition × IWM interaction was also noted, F(1, 140) = 4.81, p < .001. An inspection of the means indicated that associations between IWM and female behavior were most notable in the conflict condition. Furthermore, planned contrasts revealed that secure women displayed less negative behavior than insecure women, t(140) = −2.32, p < .05. However, no significant differences were noted between preoccupied and dismissing women, t(140) = 1.00, p = .22. As predicted, unresolved/secure women (M = 104) displayed more negative behavior in the conflict management condition when contrasted to unresolved/secure women (M = 65), t(140) = 3.45, p < .001. Finally, unresolved/secure women were more negative than insecure women in this condition, t(140) = 2.09, p < .05.

### Unresolved Attachment Status and Controlling Behavior

It was hypothesized that unresolved participants assigned a secondary insecure attachment classification would display more controlling behavior than unresolved/secure participants as well as young adults classified as insecure (i.e., dismissing or preoccupied). To test this hypothesis, a closer examination of specific negative behaviors exhibited in the conflict management condition was warranted. In particular, associations between IWM and the occurrence of contempt, defensiveness, and domineering behavior were examined.3 Mean frequencies for these behaviors in the conflict management condition are reported in Table 4. To test the predictions, 5 (IWM) × 3 (Contempt, Domineering, Defensiveness) MANOVA were performed; specific types of negative behavior were treated as within-subjects variables.4 For the young men, significant main effects were noted for IWM, F(4, 140) = 10.08, p < .0001, as well as the within-subjects contrasts of negative behavior, F(2, 139) = 83.9, p < .0001. A significant IWM × Negative Behavior interaction, F(8, 278) = 3.76, p < .0001, was also documented. This interaction would indicate that specific negative behaviors exhibited during conflict were dependent on the nature of the individual’s working model of attachment.

To deconstruct this significant interaction, planned comparisons were performed to study the hypotheses. Unresolved/insecure men were not significantly different from preoccupied and dismissing men in terms of contempt, t(140) = 1.07, p = .22, or defensiveness, t(140) = 1.20, p = .23. However, and as predicted, unresolved/insecure men were more domineering than preoccupied and dismissing men, t(140) = 3.23, p < .05. In addition, unresolved/insecure men were more domineering, t(140) = 1.90, p < .05, and defensive, t(140) = 2.67, p < .01, than unresolved/secure men.

A similar analysis was performed on female negative behavior. For the young women, significant main effects were noted for IWM, F(4, 140) = 7.36, p < .0001, as well as for the within-subjects comparison of negative behavior, F(2, 139) = 108.3, p < .0001. In addition, this MANOVA yielded a significant IWM ×

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3 The analyses referred to in Footnote 1 were repeated for this MANOVA analysis series. Because these analyses yielded essentially the same pattern of results, we again chose to represent the results using the original analysis.

4 This analysis strategy is the multivariate approach to repeated measures in which multiple DVs replace the within-subjects IV (i.e., profile analysis; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). For the MANOVA within-subject contrasts, Wilks’s lambda criterion was used to test the multivariate null hypothesis.
Negative Behavior interaction, $F(8, 278) = 2.94, p < .005$. The planned comparisons revealed that unresolved/insecure women were not significantly different from dismissing and preoccupied women in terms of contempt, $t(140) = 1.49, p = .14$, or defensiveness, $t(140) = .923, p = .36$. However, and as predicted, unresolved/insecure women displayed significantly more dominating behavior when contrasted to their dismissing and preoccupied counterparts, $t(140) = 2.78, p < .01$. Unresolved/insecure women displayed significantly more dominating, $t(140) = 3.67, p < .01$, and defensiveness, $t(140) = 2.23, p < .05$, and marginally more contempt, $t(140) = 1.83, p < .06$, than unresolved/insecure women.

**The Moderating Role of Partner IWM**

The aforementioned results pertained to the prediction of individual behavior; a series of analyses that focused on the impact of IWM on couple behavior was conducted next. Unfortunately, because there exist so many potential couple IWM combinations (e.g., male unresolved/insecure—female dismissing), analyses were limited to attachment security/insecurity. We regret that all of the couples that contained a partner (or both partners) classified as unresolved were dropped because of small cell sizes. Thus, the remaining 80 couples consisted of four groups: man and woman secure ($n = 29$); man insecure and woman secure ($n = 14$); man secure and woman insecure ($n = 18$); and man insecure and woman insecure ($n = 19$). The means and standard deviations for male and female positive and negative behaviors as moderated by couple IWM are presented in Table 5.

To predict joint couple behavior, 2 (Male IWM) \(\times\) 2 (Female IWM) \(\times\) 2 (Experimental Condition) mixed ANOVAs were conducted.\(^5\) In terms of predicting positive couple behavior, significant experimental condition, $F(1, 76) = 53.3, p < .0001$, and female IWM, $F(1, 76) = 11.05, p < .001$, main effects were noted. No significant Experimental Condition $\times$ Male IWM, $F(1, 76) = .530, p > .05$, Experimental Condition $\times$ Female IWM, $F(1, 76) = .465, p > .05$, or Experimental Conditions $\times$ Male IWM $\times$ Female IWM, $F(1, 76) = .181, p > .05$, interactions were noted. A follow-up analysis revealed that couples containing a secure woman ($M = 190$) displayed significantly more positive behavior across the experimental conditions than couples with an insecure woman ($M = 131$), $t(78) = 3.47, p < .001$.

The analysis of negative behavior revealed another result pattern. In terms of predicting negative couple behavior, the ANOVA revealed significant main effects for experimental condition, $F(1, 76) = 199.7, p < .0001$, and male IWM, $F(1, 76) = 7.42, p < .01$. In addition, a significant Experimental Condition $\times$ Male IWM interaction was noted, $F(1, 76) = 7.82, p < .01$. No significant Experimental Condition $\times$ Female IWM, $F(1, 76) = 1.78, p > .05$, or Experimental Condition $\times$ Male IWM $\times$ Female IWM, $F(1, 76) = .11, p > .05$, interactions were noted. An inspection of the means revealed that associations between male IWM and conflict management behavior were more pronounced in the conflict management condition. Additional analyses revealed that couples containing an insecure man ($M = 128$) exhibited more negative behavior in the conflict condition than couples with a secure man ($M = 89$), $t(78) = -3.25, p < .002$.

\(^5\) Additional analyses were conducted to separately predict male and female behavior. The pattern of results for predicting male and female behavior was almost identical to those found for the prediction of joint behavior. That is, female IWM predicted the occurrence of positive male and female behavior, and male IWM predicted the occurrence of negative male and female behavior in the conflict condition.
The associations between working models of attachment and couple behavior were complex, and the study results hold implications for theory, research, and practice. Supporting previous research (Cohn et al., 1992; Kobak & Hazan, 1991), young adults with secure IWM used more positive (at least in terms of the women) and less negative behavior in romantic relationships when contrasted to insecure adults. Although secure people occasionally engage in negative behaviors during discussions of conflict, it seems clear that the feelings of romantic partners would be preserved by their liberal use of positive behavior during these disagreements. Thus, the finding that working models of attachment predict the emotional content of discussions during conflict management is an important finding. A number of researchers have documented that this emotional content is as important as actual conflict resolution in terms of predicting relationship distress and dissolution (Gottman, 1994).

We also expected that preoccupied individuals would have more difficulties with interactive behavior than dismissing participants. Previous research has documented that preoccupied individuals often report more difficulties with psychological health (e.g., Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998) and that individuals who report major anxieties (e.g., fears regarding abandonment) regarding their ability to forge healthy romantic relationships often report more conflict management problems (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Simpson et al., 1996). However, the results of the current investigation suggest that dismissing and preoccupied individuals have difficulties managing conflict in romantic relationships. In addition, although specific comparisons were omitted between preoccupied and dismissing individuals on specific conflict behaviors (e.g., contempt), it is interesting to note that conflict management styles (e.g., dismissing individuals exhibiting extreme defensiveness) did not emerge. These results are similar to data provided by Paley et al. (1999) in married couples.

We documented that female attachment security predicted the occurrence of joint couple positive behaviors across the experimental conditions; yet, male IWM insecurity predicted the frequency of negative behaviors. Perhaps these findings can be best understood by integrating attachment theory, sex role development (Gilligan, 1982), and theories on intimacy development (Feiring, 1999). When considering these perspectives, women in general would be expected to display more positive behavior in young adult romantic relationships because women are socialized earlier than men to develop interpersonal skills (e.g., empathy, communication skills). Although men may eventually develop these relationship skills (particularly young men with secure IWM), it is possible that young women enter these early relationships better equipped for displaying positive behavior (even in the face of disagreements with partners).

However, gender alone does not guarantee the expression of positive behaviors—secure women displayed more positive behavior than their insecure counterparts. Whereas insecure and secure women may have had ample time to learn what not to do to preserve attachment relationships, perhaps secure women have better appraisals for what to do to maintain these relationships. I expect that secure young men may be open to learning the secrets of romantic relationship success; they simply have not had the same lessons in intimacy (e.g., Feiring, 1999). Perhaps this would explain why insecure men, but not women, display more problems during conflict negotiation. Insecure women may purposefully avoid conflict because they are concerned they will lose their partner or may bitterly complain about their partners to others. Thus, it is quite conceivable that sex role orientations may moderate or mediate relations between gender, IWM, and interactive behavior (cf. Simpson et al., 1996).

How the IWM of both partners influenced conflict management abilities could not be fully specified in the present study. For example, a stronger analysis would take into account the unresolved attachment status of the partners. Such an analysis was

### Table 5

| Couple Behavior as Moderated by Couple Internal Working Models of Attachment |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Couple classification         | Total positive  | Positive, Waiting room | Positive, Conflict |
| M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Man secure/Woman secure       | 187.6 | 79.5 | 109.6 | 49.6 | 78.0 | 38.9 |
| Man secure/Woman insecure     | 142.9 | 76.3 | 82.7 | 42.2 | 60.2 | 40.9 |
| Man insecure/Woman secure     | 187.1 | 78.9 | 111.3 | 44.5 | 75.9 | 40.1 |
| Man insecure/Woman insecure   | 128.0 | 62.5 | 82.8 | 44.2 | 45.2 | 29.2 |

| Couple classification         | Total negative  | Negative, Waiting room | Negative, Conflict |
| M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Man secure/Woman secure       | 110.6 | 62.8 | 25.8 | 20.9 | 84.8 | 48.2 |
| Man secure/Woman insecure     | 125.9 | 50.4 | 27.7 | 19.6 | 98.2 | 40.5 |
| Man insecure/Woman secure     | 147.8 | 70.5 | 31.2 | 18.3 | 116.6 | 61.5 |
| Man insecure/Woman insecure   | 166.3 | 64.5 | 33.5 | 26.0 | 132.8 | 55.4 |
prohibited because of the low numbers of couples representing certain design cells; however, it should be noted that the handful of couples containing two unresolved/insecure partners \((n = 7)\) displayed very high amounts of negative behavior during the conflict management condition (in some cases, well over 200 instances of negative behavior in 15 min). In addition, beyond considering unresolved attachment status, certain IWM combinations (male dismissing; female preoccupied) may cause more difficulties than others (both partners dismissing).

Perhaps one of the greater contributions of the present study to counseling professionals was specifying the role of unresolved attachment status in romantic relationships. The present study represents one of the first systematic investigations on this issue, and the data provide certain challenges to professionals with interests in adult attachment. First, previous AAI-based studies relying on the standard three-way classification system (i.e., secure, dismissing, preoccupied) might be questioned in cases when unresolved participants have not been set aside or separately analyzed. In addition, researchers using Main and Goldwyn’s (1994) four-way classification system (i.e., secure, dismissing, preoccupied, unresolved) should be sensitive to the idea that unresolved adults represent a diverse group (cf. Schuengel et al., 1999). The fact that unresolved/insecure individuals display more negative behavior than individuals who are simply insecure suggests that unresolved attachment status adds something uniquely maladaptive to attachment relationships.

As predicted, unresolved/insecure adults displayed more dominating behavior during conflict than insecure individuals. Whether or not this controlling behavior influences other domains of romantic relationship functioning is open to question; however, the parallels between the behaviors (controlling behavior) and backgrounds (history of loss or abuse) of unresolved/insecure adults and individuals who display physical violence in romantic relationships represent an intriguing theoretical angle (cf. Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). In addition, the present data, when marshaled together with the longitudinal research involving disorganized infants (e.g., Jacobvitz & Hazen, 1999; Main & Cassidy, 1988), suggests that controlling behavior becomes a coping mechanism important to the livelihood of unresolved/disorganized people. I have theorized elsewhere (Creasey, 2001) that because of deep fears regarding the trustworthiness/predictability of attachment figures, unresolved/insecure adults may use controlling behavior as a device to prevent relationship distress and the unregulated fearful affect that is triggered when the attachment system is threatened (cf. Hesse, 2001). Furthermore, unresolved adults who have developed secure IWM may be less prone to exhibit such behavior because secure adults possess the ability to implicitly regulate negative affect or seek emotional support when distressed (Creasey, 2001; Hesse, 2001). A major research direction would be to further clarify why security of attachment may serve as a buffer to unresolved traumatic experiences.

In terms of other research directions, it may be possible to prescreen couples to recruit large enough samples of preoccupied and unresolved participants to more closely examine how these IWM influence couple interactions (Schuengel et al., 1999). In addition, other interesting predictor and outcome variables could be incorporated into research designs. For example, the present study was limited to the assessment of working models of relationships based on an interview regarding familial attachment experiences. Other researchers have developed assessments to measure working models of attachment within the romantic relationship (e.g., Crowell & Owens, 1996; Kobak & Hazan, 1991) as well as self-report measures to assess general expectancies about adult relationships and romantic partners (i.e., attachment orientations; e.g., Collins & Read, 1990). Incorporating multiple measures of attachment may strengthen our prediction of interactive behavior in romantic relationships. There are also alternatives to solely examining conflict management strategies in romantic couples. Assessments of problem-solving skills, or the ability to empathize with a partner’s personal problem, are other important abilities linked to relationship satisfaction and stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) that theoretically could be tied to working models of attachment. Finally, future studies involving couple interactions could be greatly enhanced through the analysis of behavior sequences. For example, individuals with insecure attachment stances might be more prone to escalate conflict, whereas adults with secure IWM may exhibit behaviors that lead to conflict resolution.

We had hoped that information gleaned from the present study would have implications for treatment specialists. Because clients often develop attachment-like relationships with therapists, it is possible that clients approach therapists in much the same way that they approach other attachment figures (Dozier & Tyrrell, 1998; Mallinckrodt, Coble, & Gantt, 1995). Thus, dismissing clients may miss appointments and view the therapeutic process as a waste of time, preoccupied clients may demand a great deal of attention (e.g., demanding more appointments) (Slade, 1999), and unresolved adults may be more at risk for control-oriented or ominous behavior (e.g., sexualized behavior, threats regarding violence; cf. Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). Thus, embracing an attachment perspective may help us better understand how clients initially approach and respond to treatment settings. As Slade (1999) pointed out, perhaps one major initial goal of the therapeutic process is to avoid reinforcing the very IWM the client brings into this context.

Couples therapy, of course, presents unique challenges because there may be a variety of IWM combinations that create major difficulties for relationships. For example, a couple containing a preoccupied and a dismissing partner might have to be approached differently than a couple containing a dismissing and an unresolved/insecure partner. Moreover, because the alteration of IWM is thought to take time (Bowlby, 1988), the idea of altering the IWM of two clients presents a daunting task. However, there are a number of ideas that could potentially facilitate this process. For example, because individuals with insecure IWM tend to also have unrealistic or problematic beliefs, attitudes, and attributions about romantic partners (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997), the possibility arises that modifying these expectancies using cognitive–behavior strategies (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990) could provoke changes in how one views their partner. Perhaps this change would encourage clients to reflect on, and perhaps integrate, thinking about their parents and parenting history. Alternatively, interventions such as emotionally focused couples therapy (e.g., Johnson & Greenberg, 1992) might encourage individuals to further explore the roots of their negative emotions during conflict. Indeed, such reflection could be spurred by changes in a partner’s behavior in which increases in empathy, affection, and support may directly contradict deeply ingrained IWM.
Although I have extensively used the Adult Attachment Interview in my research, I am also aware of treatment specialists that use this methodology in their practice. Although extensive training is required to master the AAI classification system, insecure adults typically display poorly integrated thought during carefully probed discussions of childhood experiences with parents, marked by jarring violations in linguistic discourse that often can be easily spotted by therapists. For example, one of the dismissing participants indicated that his mother was a “perfect, loving, mother” yet, several seconds later, recalled being left alone on an interstate highway shoulder as a lesson for misbehaving in the family car. An unresolved participant, during a discussion of her father’s suicide, suddenly switched from past to present tense (“... and I see him in the car, the motor is running, his eyes are open, his eyes are open ...”) and adopted a childish voice marked by ungrammatical speech. Encouraging clients to immediately reflect on their thinking as they discuss these experiences may represent an important first step toward client integration of attachment-related thought, an important process for eventual alteration of IWM (Bowlby, 1988).

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