Bullying Behaviors and Attachment Styles

Kylie Williams & Janice H. Kennedy
Georgias Southern University

Peer victimization has become highly prevalent in western schools with some studies showing that as many as 50% of high school students report having victimized or been victimized (Gaul, 2010). Although parental factors such as involvement (Conners-Burrow, et al., 2009) and support (Hill et al., 2004) have been linked to aggressive behavior and the likelihood of becoming a victim of school bullying (Jeynes, 2008), the role of the parent-child attachment relationship has not been examined. The present study examined relationships between parent-child attachment and bullying (both physical and relational) and victimization. Results showed that female participants were more likely to be physically aggressive when they had higher levels of attachment avoidance to their mothers and higher levels of attachment anxiety with their fathers. In addition, female participants were more likely to engage in relational aggression when they experienced higher levels of attachment anxiety to their mothers, while male participants were more likely to engage in this form of aggression when they experienced higher levels of attachment anxiety to their fathers. With regard to peer victimization, female participants reporting higher levels of anxiety about their maternal relationships were more likely to report being a victim of peer aggression in childhood. Implications for these findings are discussed.

About half of adolescents report that they have either bullied their peers or been victims of bullying (Gaul, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Bullying is typically defined as repeated relational or physical aggression directed to one or more peers (Olweus, 1995). Relational aggression includes behaviors such as rumor spreading, taunting, and threatening to withdraw friendship (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006), while physical aggression includes behaviors such as hitting and pushing (Houndoumadi & Patraski, 2001).

Peer victimization can result in devastating consequences for children and adolescents. Researchers have shown an association between peer victimization and internalizing symptoms (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Hilt, 2009). Specifically, peer victimization has been linked to emotional dysregulation (McLaughlin et al., 2009), loneliness, and anxiety (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004). When examining relational aggression in particular, researchers have found that this single type of aggression predicts depression and anxiety in girls.
(Ellis, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2008). In addition to the increased likelihood of experiencing these internalizing symptoms, both victims and bullies report a reduced sense of life satisfaction (Flaspoehler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009).

Peer victimization is related to school difficulties as well (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2008). Because bullied children have a lower sense of self-efficacy, their academic achievement tends to be lower than their peers. In addition, bullied children are more frequently absent from school (Gastic, 2008). Interestingly, victims are also more likely to get into trouble at school and more likely to receive serious forms of discipline than nonbullied children. These difficulties often result in school transfers.

One of the most devastating consequences of bullying is the higher incidence of suicide attempts and ideation among bullies, victims, bully-victims (both a bully and a victim of bullying), and even bystanders (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010). These relationships have even been found in elementary school children, with bully-victims being at the highest risk for these problems. In addition, bully-victims who also witness bullying incidents are at an even greater psychological risk for suicide (Rivers et al., 2010) than bully-victims who do not witness bullying instances. Furthermore, girls who are considered to be both victims and bystanders think about suicide more often than uninvolved students and bystanders (Lomek, et al.).

Male and female children tend to have very different experiences with bullying. Boys are more likely to bully using physical aggression and to become bully-victims than are girls, while girls are more likely to use relational aggression (Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Boys and girls are equally likely to be victims (Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Santinello, 2008). Moreover, as boys develop, they tend to experience more bullying and to report a greater liking for bullies, while bullying for girls peaks at about age 13 (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001).

Parental Factors Predicting Bullying and Victimization

Children who are involved in bullying report less parental academic and social support than children who are uninvolved (Conners-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009). Moreover, parental divorce (Malone et al., 2004) and maltreatment (Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008) have been linked to aggressive behaviors in boys. Parental discipline techniques are also associated with child aggression (Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, & Michiels, 2009). The use of physical punishment is associated with physical aggression in children, especially boys, while psychological control is associated with relational aggression.
With regard to victimization, low parental involvement (Jeynes, 2008), and parent-child relations (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998) have been found to be predictive. However, this relationship is different for boys and girls. Male victimization is associated with perceived maternal over-protectiveness while female victimization is associated with perceived maternal rejection. This is especially the case when boys react with fear during mother-child conflicts and girls cope aggressively during mother-child conflicts. Paternal relationships have been linked to the likelihood of being victimized as well. Specifically, dysfunctional attitudes of the father and paternal rejection are positively correlated with peer victimization (Beran, 2009). Gibb, Abramson, and Alloy (2004) found that bullied children are more likely to experience emotional maltreatment by parents than nonbullied children.

Bullies, victims, and bully-victims all report having more negative family experiences than children not involved in bullying (Mohr, 2006). These experiences include both family conflict and family violence. Victims also report having less affectionate and supportive mothers, while only aggressors report having less affectionate and supportive fathers.

**Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory states that, as infants, we all form attachments to our primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1979). This attachment can be secure or insecure depending on the quality of early interactions with the caregiver. Specifically, the quality of attachment depends on factors such as sensitivity to infant signals, contingent responding, and close bodily contact. Ainsworth classified infants as displaying one of three different patterns of attachment: secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant. Each of these attachment patterns is distinguished based on several behavioral characteristics exhibited by the child.

According to Ainsworth (1979), caregivers of secure infants tend to be much more sensitive and responsive to their infants’ needs than caregivers of insecurely attached infants. This allows the infant to trust and rely on the caregiver, leading to security. Infants with caregivers who do not respond contingently and sensitively to their infants’ needs tend to become insecure-ambivalent since they are unsure of what to expect from the caregiver. In addition to a lack of responding, caregivers of avoidant infants also tend to reject and become easily angered with their infant, and avoid bodily contact with them. Infants learn to avoid caregivers to lessen their anxiety.

**Influence of Early Attachment on Development Beyond Infancy**

Early attachment patterns have been shown to play a role in predicting future behavior such as problem solving, academic
performance, and social competence with peers (Stams, Juffer, & van Ijzendoorn, 2002; Thompson, 2000), as well as psychological disorders. For example, Warren, Huston, Egeland, and Sroufe (1997) found that those displaying an insecure-ambivalent attachment style in infancy were more likely to develop an anxiety disorder later in life.

When examining attachment styles in college students, Schwartz, Lindley, and Buboltz (2007), for example, found that those students considered as having an anxious attachment style were more likely to seek attention from others and engage in social comparison. Those considered to have an avoidant attachment style were less likely to seek emotional support. Furthermore, Allen, Porter, MacFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh (2007) linked attachment security to a feeling of being connected to peers.

**Attachment, Bullying, and Victimization**

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether there are links among attachment styles, bullying and victimization. Indirect evidence suggests that this may be the case. Parental involvement (Conners-Burrow et al., 2009), parental divorce (Malone et al., 2009), and parental stress, (Fite et al., 2008) have been shown to predict aggressive behavior in children and adolescents. Low family involvement and high family conflict have been shown to predict peer victimization (Jeynes, 2008; Mohr, 2006). Specifically with regard to attachment, previous studies have found that individuals who are insecure-avoidant in attachment are more likely to demonstrate antisocial traits (e.g., lack of concern for others’ feelings) and callous/unemotional characteristics (Fite, Greening, & Stoppelbien, 2008), as well as increased instances of externalizing behavior in middle school ((Allen et al., 2007; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2007). Moreover, they are less likely to form close relationships with others (Ainsworth, 1979). Those with secure patterns of attachment have shown a more optimistic attributional style with regard to judgments of others and better problem solving skills in resolving interpersonal conflict (Fite, Greening, & Stoppelbien) and lower levels of aggression (Constantino et al., 2006; Cummings-Robeau, Lopez, & Rice, 2009; Leenaars et al., 2008). A characteristic of insecure-ambivalent attachment individuals is an excessive need to please others, anxiety about relationships, and frustration when close relationships do not form as quickly as desired (Ainsworth, 1979). Therefore, it was hypothesized that those who were secure or insecure-ambivalent in attachment to mother would show lower rates of bullying compared to insecure-avoidant individuals. Those who were insecure-ambivalent in attachment to mother were expected to show higher rates of victimization compared to secure or insecure-avoidant individuals.
Less research has been conducted with father-child attachment as a predictor of social and academic competence, so predictions for father-child attachment security were more exploratory in nature. Earlier research shows that father-child attachment insecurity predicts externalizing behavior in boys (Fagot & Kavanagh, 1990; Roelofs, Meesters, Huurne, Bamelis, & Muris, 2006). It was therefore predicted that the father-child relationship might be more predictive for boys than for girls. Hypotheses were that insecure-ambivalent attachment would be associated with victimization and insecure-avoidant attachment would be associated with bullying, as with mother-child attachment.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were a convenience sample of 144 undergraduate Introduction to Psychology students from a rural, southeastern university (58 men and 86 women). They received course credit in exchange for their participation. The average age of the participants was 19.46 \((SD = 1.61)\) years. Seventy percent \((n = 101)\) of the participants self-identified as Caucasian, 24 percent \((n = 34)\) as African-American, 2 percent \((n = 3)\) as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4 percent \((n = 6)\) as “other” for their ethnicity. In addition, 67 percent \((n = 96)\) of participants’ parents were married, 18 percent \((n = 26)\) were divorced, 10 percent \((n = 14)\) were never married, 3 percent \((n = 4)\) were cohabitating, and 1 percent \((n = 2)\) were widowed when the participants were at the ages being studied. Seventeen percent of participants reported having no father figure within their households, while only one percent reported having no mother figure.

**Materials**

The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) has been used to measure security of close relationships, including that of significant others, friends, and parents, and provides separate scores for both attachment anxiety and avoidance. A slightly modified version of the ECR-R Questionnaire (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2001) was used to measure childhood parental attachments. This scale is divided into two separate subscales to measure both avoidance and anxiety with regard to attachment. Participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Example items include: “I was afraid that I would lose my mother’s/father’s love,” and “I often worried that my mother/father would not want to be around me.” There were separate surveys for both maternal and paternal attachment. In past studies, Cronbach’s alpha has been established for the two subscales \(.95\) and \(.91\) for avoidance and anxiety, respectively; see
Scores were determined by reverse keying necessary items and averaging the scores for each scale.

A subscale of the Aggression Scale (Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to measure physical aggression. This scale consisted of nine statements in which participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = least characteristic to 5 = most characteristic. Sample items include: “If someone hits me, I hit back” and “I have threatened people that I know.” Buss and Perry (1992) calculated a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 for this scale.

The short version of the Indirect Aggression Scale for aggressors (IAS-A; Forrest, Eatough, & Shevlin, 2005) was used to measure relational aggression. Three subscales measure social exclusion, use of malicious humor, and guilt induction. Participants rated how often they engaged in aggressive behaviors on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = regularly. Sample items include how often they “spread rumors about [others]” and “used sarcasm to insult [others].” Forrest, Eatough, and Shevlin (2005) calculated Cronbach’s alpha for these subscales (.82, .84, and .81 respectively).

A modified version of two subscales of the Social Experiences Questionnaire (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010) was used to measure victimization. Participants rated the items on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Responses ranged from 1 = never to 6 = always. Example items include: “How often did your peers hit you?” and “How often did your peers call you mean names?” This scale was divided into two subscales measuring both physical and relational victimization. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found a Cronbach’s alpha of .80 for relational victimization and .78 for physical victimization.

Procedure
Participants completed the questionnaires in small groups of no more than 15 people. First, participants were asked several questions in order to facilitate better recollection of their childhood memories. Examples included: “Who was your best friend in middle school (around ages 11 to 13)?” and “Who were the popular kids in your middle school class?” Participants were given 15 seconds to answer each question and instructed to jot down their answers on a blank sheet of paper. Then participants filled out the study measures according to how they recalled feeling from ages 11 to 13. The order of the surveys was randomized. Sessions lasted about 30 minutes.

RESULTS
Preliminary Analyses
An independent samples t-test was conducted to analyze gender differences in physical and relational aggression. Gender was related to
both physical aggression, \( t(129) = -5.05, p < .001 \), and relational aggression, \( t(129) = -2.75, p < .01 \). Male participants (\( M = 2.60, SD = .80 \); \( M = 1.79, SD = .54 \)) reported engaging in more physical and relational aggression than female participants (\( M = 1.94, SD = .69 \); \( M = 1.54, SD = .50 \)). Gender was not related to parental relationships.

A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze ethnic differences in parent-child relationships. Ethnicity was related to higher levels of attachment anxiety to the father, \( F(3, 127) = 2.90, p < .05 \), and higher levels of attachment avoidance to the father, \( F(3, 127) = 6.59, p < .001 \). Fisher’s LSD test was used to further analyze mean differences. African-American participants (\( M = 2.67, SD = 1.31 \); \( M = 4.32, SD = 1.61 \)) were more likely to report higher levels of both anxiety and avoidance to their fathers than Caucasian participants (\( M = 2.06, SD = .94 \); \( M = 2.98, SD = 1.37 \)). There were no ethnic differences found for victimization, \( F(3, 127) = 1.29, p > .05 \), and physical, \( F(3, 127) = 1.91, p > .05 \), and relational aggression \( F(3, 127) = .71, p > .05 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Correlations of Participant Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Physical Agg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Relational Agg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Victimization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Maternal Anx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Maternal Avoid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Paternal Anx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Paternal Avoid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at the .01 level (two-tailed). * Significant at the .05 level (two-tailed).  
Agg = Aggression; Anx = anxiety; Avoid = Avoidance

Because of the higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance found in African-Americans, a 2 x 2 (ethnicity x father presence/absence) chi square was conducted to examine the relationship between the ethnicity of participants and the presence of a father figure within the participants’ households. Ethnicity of the participant and whether or not a father figure was present in the household were significantly related, \( \chi^2(1, N = 143) = 29.35, p < .01 \). Ninety-three percent of Caucasian participants reported the presence of a father figure (e.g., father, stepfather) in their households, while only 62% of African-American participants reported the presence of a father or step-father in their households.
Hypothesis Testing

Physical and Relational Aggression. Participation in bullying was expected to relate to higher avoidance scores for attachment to one’s parents. In the present study, bullying was divided into two subtypes of aggression: physical and relational. Physical aggression was not correlated with higher avoidance scores to the mother $r(128) = .10, p > .05$ or father $r(128) = .17, p > .05$. However, relational aggression was correlated with higher avoidance scores for attachment to the father, $r(128) = .18, p < .05$, but not the mother $r(128) = .07, p > .05$.

TABLE 2  Relational Aggression Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE $B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paternal Anxiety</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .06, p < .01$

TABLE 3  Physical Aggression Regression for Female Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1:</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE $B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Avoidance</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 2:</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE $B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Avoidance</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Anxiety</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .15, p < .05$

Two multiple regression analyses were also used to analyze the effects of parent-child relationships (avoidance and anxiety) and engagement in bullying. First, physical aggression was entered as the criterion variable and all four attachment scores were entered as predictor variables (attachment anxiety and avoidance toward the mother, and attachment anxiety and father avoidance toward the father). Second, relational aggression was entered as the criterion variable and all attachment scores were entered as predictor variables. Parental attachment scores could not significantly predict physical aggression; however, paternal attachment scores did predict relational aggression, $F(1,130) = 9.33, p < .01$ (see Table 2). Specifically, participants who reported higher levels of attachment anxiety toward their father were more likely to engage in relational aggression. In addition, when examining the scores of male and female participants separately, higher avoidant attachment scores to the mother and higher anxiety attachment scores to the father predicted physical aggression in female participants, $F(1,77) = 6.53, p < .01$ (see Table 3). There were no significant predictors of physical aggression in male participants. Furthermore, when
examining the scores of male and female participants separately, higher anxiety attachment scores to the mother predicted relational aggression in female participants, $F(1,77) = 4.11, p < .05$, while higher anxiety attachment scores to the father predicted relational aggression in male participants, $F(1,51) = 13.40, p < .01$ (see Tables 4 and 5).

**TABLE 4 Relational Aggression Regression for Male Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father Anxiety</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .21, p < .01$

**TABLE 5 Relational Aggression Regression for Female Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Anxiety</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .05, p < .05$

**Victimization.** Victimization was expected to correlate with parent-child relationships. Victimization was found to correlate with higher rates of anxiety to the mother, $r(128) = .30, p < .01$, higher rates of anxiety to the father, $r(128) = .23, p = .01$, and higher rates of avoidance to the father, $r(128) = .24, p = .006$. A multiple regression was used to analyze the effects of parental relationships on victimization by entering victimization as the criterion variable and all attachment scores as the predictor variables. Quality of parent-child relationships did predict victimization $F(1,130) = 14.31, p < .001$. Specifically, higher levels of attachment anxiety to the mother significantly predicted victimization (see Table 6). However, when examining male and female participants’ scores separately, this relationship only existed for female participants, $F(1,77) = 13.81, p < .001$ (see Table 7).

**TABLE 6 Victimization Regression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Anxiety</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .10, p < .01$

**TABLE 7 Victimization Regression for Female Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Anxiety</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .15, p < .01$
Attachment Interactions

To further understand the relationship between levels of attachment anxiety and levels of attachment avoidance and bullying behaviors (physical aggression, relational aggression, and victimization), the interactive effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance levels to the mother and father were examined by conducting eight step-wise multiple regression analyses. In step one of these analyses, gender was presented as a control. In step two, attachment anxiety and avoidance were entered to examine their main effects. In step three, the interaction between attachment anxiety and avoidance was entered to explore possible moderating effects. All predictor variables were centered before being included in these analyses. An examination of these analyses revealed a significant interaction between levels of attachment anxiety to the mother and attachment avoidance to the mother for physical aggression. To examine the source of the 2-way interaction, the simple effects of attachment avoidance were assessed at high (+1 SD) and at low (-1 SD) levels of attachment anxiety.

There was a marked increase in physical aggression from low to high levels of attachment avoidance toward the mother among individuals high in attachment anxiety toward the mother, $t(137) = .34, p < .05$. No such effects were found among individuals relatively low in attachment anxiety. Thus, attachment anxiety to the mother was only related to physical aggression among individuals relatively high on attachment avoidance to the mother.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships between both bullying and victimization and attachment to one’s parents, taking into account specific types of aggressive behavior (physical and relational). The main findings are as follows: female participants were more likely to report engaging in physical aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment avoidance to their mothers and higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their fathers. In addition, female participants were more likely to report engaging in relational aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their mothers, while male participants were more likely to report engaging in this form of aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their fathers. Also, female participants scoring higher on measures of anxiety about their relationship with their mothers were more likely to report having been a victim of peer aggression in childhood.

Engagement in Bullying and Parent-Child Attachments

Past research demonstrates that parent-child attachment relationships predict peer aggression (Constantino et al., 2006; Cummings-Robeau et
al., 2009; Leenaars et al., 2008). The goal of the present study was to expand upon these past research findings and examine the relationship between specific attachment styles and specific patterns of aggression, as well as victimization. Specifically, it was hypothesized that higher avoidant attachment scores would predict higher physical and relational aggression scores. Support for links between parent-child attachment and involvement in peer bullying was found, although not for avoidant attachment scores as predicted. Participants reporting higher anxiety about their attachment relationship with their fathers were more likely to report engaging in relational aggression in childhood. However, gender differences were also found for aggression expression in conjunction with relationships with parents. Specifically, female participants were more likely to be physically aggressive when they had higher levels of attachment avoidance to their mothers and higher levels of attachment anxiety with their fathers. Parental attachments did not predict physical aggression in male participants. In addition, female participants were more likely to engage in relational aggression when they experienced higher levels of attachment anxiety to their mothers, while male participants were more likely to engage in this form of aggression when they experienced higher levels of attachment anxiety to their fathers.

Peer Victimization and Parent-Child Attachments

It was hypothesized that peer victimization would also be predicted by parent-child attachment scores. However, only female participants reporting higher anxiety about their maternal relationships were more likely to report being a victim of peer aggression in childhood. No parental attachments predicted victimization for male participants.

Present Findings in Relation to Past Research

The present study’s findings that attachment anxiety towards the mother predicts victimization and attachment anxiety towards the father predicts relational aggression support Mohr’s (2006) findings that children with less affectionate and supportive mothers are more likely to report themselves as being victimized and children with less affection and supportive fathers are more likely to report aggression against others. Children who have higher levels of attachment anxiety to their mothers may be more likely to become victimized because victimization is related to maternal over-protectiveness (Ladd & Ladd, 1998), which is in turn related to separation anxiety (Manicavasagar, Silove, Wagner, & Hadzi-Pavlovic, 1998). If this is the case, then bullying interventions should focus more on improving mother-child relationships for victims and building father-child relationships for aggressors.
Because teacher ratings of insecure avoidant attachment in girls have been linked to more peer difficulties (Fagot et al., 1990), it was predicted that higher levels of parental avoidance would be linked to aggressive behavior. However, results of the present study only partially supported this hypothesis. Paternal avoidance was significantly correlated with relational aggression. In addition to paternal avoidance, paternal anxiety was also correlated with relational aggression. On the other hand, attachment avoidance scores toward the mother and attachment anxiety scores towards the father only predicted physical aggression in female participants.

In addition to the past research just discussed, Roelofs et al.’s (2006) study suggests that externalizing behavior is linked with maternal and paternal attachment in children age nine to 12. However, unlike the present study, attachment styles in Roelof et al.’s study were dichotomized as either secure or insecure due to a lack of variability in specific attachment styles. The present study partially supports Roelof’s findings in that externalizing behavior (taking the form of relational aggression) was positively correlated with paternal attachment anxiety and avoidance. In addition to these correlations, regression analyses showed that paternal attachment anxiety predicted relational aggression. Unlike Roelof’s study, the present study only found a link between maternal attachment styles and aggression in female participants.

Several explanations may account for this difference in findings. First, different measures of parental attachment were used. The ECR-R (used in the present study) included statements with which participants rated how much they agreed or disagreed, while the RQC (used by Roelof et al.) consisted of four paragraphs in which participants chose which one best described them. Continuous data such as that provided by the ECR-R may provide a better picture of attachment styles than categorical data such as that provided by the RQC (Fraley & Spieker, 2003).

Since paternal uninvolvment (Jeynes, 2008) and negative family experiences (Mohr, 2006) have been shown to correlate with victimization, it was predicted that attachment to parents would be linked to victimization. This hypothesis was supported in that higher levels of both attachment anxiety and avoidance towards the father and both avoidance and anxiety towards the mother were correlated with victimization. Past researchers have also found gender differences related to the likelihood to participate in relational and physical aggression (Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). However, results of the present study suggest that male participants are more likely to engage in both physical and relational aggression. Social desirability in self-report (Becker &
Cherny, 1994) may have played a role in this outcome. Males are more likely to engage in extreme responding for negative items.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of this study was that participants were asked to recall events from their early adolescence (ages 11 to 13), a period occurring 6-8 years previously. Their memories for these events may not have been accurate. The present study attempted to facilitate participant recollections by asking them to remember specific events from their childhood. Future studies might survey children while they are still presently in middle school rather than college-aged individuals who are asked to look back at their past experiences. Moreover, future research might incorporate behavioral measures of physical and relational aggression rather than, or in addition to, self-report measures. Behavioral measures could provide a more accurate picture of the relationships between bullying behaviors and parental attachments. Social desirability is less likely to convolute data collected by behavioral measures than data collected by self-report.

Despite these limitations, however, the present study adds to the present literature on bullying by taking into account specific attachment patterns (avoidance and anxiety) and specific types of aggression (physical and relational). Father-child relationships were examined as well as mother-child relationships. In addition, attachment patterns were analyzed using continuous data, which provides a more accurate depiction than categorical data (Fraley et al., 2003).

In summary, findings of the present study suggest that participants’ relationships with their mothers and fathers predict different patterns of relationships with peers. Specifically, higher levels of attachment anxiety towards the father predict relational aggression, while higher levels of attachment anxiety towards the mother predict victimization. A better understanding of these relationships may enable psychologists to create new interventions in order to prevent or counteract bullying and victimization from occurring or to build more secure parent-child relationships. Prevention efforts may consist of raising public awareness of the link between parent-child and peer relationships. Parenting classes for pregnant women or new mothers that help to enhance attachment security may be a possible preventative strategy. In addition, psychologists and therapists may be able to use this information while counseling clients by stressing the importance of the parent-child relationship in supporting social and personality development of the child.

**REFERENCES**


