



The Role of Attachment Style in Predicting Emotional Abuse and Sexual Coercion in Gay and Lesbian People: An Explorative Study

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Abstract

This study was based on exploring the role of attachment style related to emotional abuse and sexual coercion in a sample of people who are gay and lesbian. A total of 182 young adults, from 18 to 25 years old (58% females, $M = 22.42$, $Sd = 1.91$), participated. Participants completed the multidimensional measure of emotional abuse to investigate emotional abuse (acted and suffered), the sexual coercion in intimate relationship scale (acted) to evaluate sexual coercion, and attachment style to investigate interpersonal attachment. The model shows that the secure attachment style is negatively connected with coercion of resources and violence, as well as acted emotional abuse. Discomfort with closeness is negatively connected with coercion of resources and violence. Need for approval is positively connected with coercion of resources and violence, as well as with manipulation. Preoccupation with relationships is negatively connected with manipulation and acted emotional abuse and is positively connected with commitment defection and suffered emotional abuse. Finally, relationship as being secondary is positively connected with suffered emotional abuse. Our results show that an inadequate attachment style in homosexual couples is responsible for sexual coercion and emotional abuse, both in males and females. Theoretical and clinical implications are discussed.

Keywords Attachment style · Emotional abuse · Coercion · Gay and lesbian people

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Introduction

Attachment Style and Romantic Relationships

The role of attachment in romantic relationships has been studied for many years by a large number of researchers, suggesting that every attachment style corresponds with different emotions, behaviors, and internal operative models, especially regarding negative attachment styles (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991a, b; Beyder-Kamjou 2005; Dutton et al. 1994; Kirkpatrick and Davis 1994; Nisenbaum and Lopez 2015; Schachner and Shaver 2004). Attachment theory (e.g., Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991a; Bowlby 1973; Brassard et al. 2009) helps researchers understand the socio-relational functioning of individuals. According to Bowlby (1973, p. 203), each person builds an internal model of the world and puts him or herself in it; this model helps that person perceive events, forecast the future, and construct plans. The working model of the world includes key features, such as a person's notion of who attachment figures are, where they can be found, and how they might be expected to respond to certain situations. Similarly, the working model of the self that people build includes a key feature, how acceptable or unacceptable they are in the eyes of their attachment figures. In other words, if people develop a secure relationship with their caregiver, they will have adequate internal working models and can satisfactorily deal with subsequent relationships. The internal working models are the patterns within the individual that generate emotions and behaviors connected to the interaction between the child and the caregiver(s). The internal working model becomes unaware and tends to become stable over time. They create a sort of relational scheme of external reality, of self-image, and how interpersonal relationships work. Moreover, they allow the future relational trend to be influenced because they act as a guide.

In line with attachment theory, patterns of secure attachment are positively connected to satisfaction, emotional adjustment, and regulation in the relationship, whereas insecure patterns are associated with negative emotions, such as anger (D'Urso and Pace 2019; Dutton et al. 1994; Maysless 1991; Nisenbaum and Lopez 2015; Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick 1997). This relationship has been found to have a direct influence on surveillance, psychological and physical violence, and coercive behaviors in heterosexual couples; for example, avoidant people have the tendency to direct their anger and blame toward a third person (an interloper, real or alleged) and not the partner, preoccupied people are more suspicious and tend to control the partner, and people with anxious attachment are more inclined to repress their anger and display subtle coercive behaviors (Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick 1997; Yarkovsky 2017).

Links in Attachment Style and Abuse and Coersion in Intimate Relationships

According to the literature, there is a connection between attachment patterns and negative behaviors toward one's partner, and it is a crucial aspect in preventing and evaluating intimate partner violence. Although violence is more frequently

expressed by men toward women, psychological abuse can be committed by both partners. Psychological abuse is a set of actions consisting of humiliation, denigration, intimidation, and threats with the purpose of controlling and isolating the partner (Kasian and Painter 1992; Rodriguez et al. 2015). Psychological and emotional abuse appears to be a consequence of a negative self-esteem and the inability to express and fulfill personal needs, especially in partners with avoidant and anxious attachment; this incapacity leads to higher levels of jealousy and to the need to control and obtain upremacy in the couple to diminish the menace of rejection and powerless feelings (Dutton et al. 1994; Yarkovsky 2017). However, evolutionary psychology has proposed a complementary model based on biological assumptions to explain psychological abuse in a couple: the sperm competition. Men and women, for different reasons, have evolved a psychological mechanism that motivates mate-retention behaviors to prevent their partners from being adulterous or leaving the relationship (Buss and Shackelford 1997; Miner et al. 2009; Shackelford et al. 2005). During the course of evolutionary history, both men and women have had to face the reproductive costs of sexual infidelity: On one hand, men are unsure about the paternity of their prole, and on the other hand, women have to share their partner's resources with other partners (Buss and Schmitt 2018; Buss and Shackelford 1997; Conroy-Beam et al. 2016; Goetz et al. 2005), adding the concept of sexual coercion to emotional abuse and violence. Sexual coercion is a range of behaviors that aim to force the partner to have sexual intercourse (Goetz and Shackelford 2006, 2009; Shackelford and Goetz, 2005). According to this theory, emotional abuse and sexual coercion are behaviors directed to control, dominate, and impose will over the partner. Although mate retention and sperm competition, to different degrees, are common in most species, evolutionary psychology accepted the idea that, in humans, self-esteem, personality, and attachment styles can influence people's development, such as that of low self-concept, lower levels of trust, and higher levels of anxiety (Botwin et al. 2006; Holden et al. 2014; Shackelford 2001; Buss and Shackelford 1997).

Attachment Style, Emotional Abuse, and Sexual Coercion

Over the years, researchers have studied these relationships mainly in heterosexual couples, highlighting gender differences with controversial results by suggesting both gender symmetry in the perpetration of emotional abuse and gender differences mediated by attachment, jealousy, and anger (Anderson 2005; Brassard et al. 2009; Dutton et al. 1994; Gormley 2005; Gormley and Lopez 2010; Henderson et al. 2005). Moreover, few researchers have assessed the role of attachment in the expression of emotional abuse and sexual coercion in couples composed of people who identify as gay or lesbian, and these results are still controversial. Some researchers suggested that there is no association between sexual orientation, attachment, and abuse (McKenry et al. 2006; Ridge and Feeney 1998; VanderLaan and Vasey 2008), but others pointed out that women who are lesbians might more frequently experience avoidant attachment than men who are gay and heterosexuals, which can impact the couple (Wells and Hansen 2003). Some authors suggested that a positive

and integrated sexual identity acts as moderator between the variables (Gemberling et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2010). Others have found a direct link between an insecure attachment style and sexual violence in homosexual romantic relationships (Gabbay and Lafontaine 2017). A relevant part of the literature—assessing the relationship between the study variables in homosexual couples—has focused on specific sexual orientation aspects as positive reactions to coming out within the family, perceived social support, and support for HIV, and other STDs (Ciesla et al. 2004; Decker et al. 2018; Edwards et al. 2015; Elizur and Mintzer 2003; Kershaw et al. 2007; Legate et al. 2012; Van Parys et al. 2014). However, most of these studies suggested that personal variables, such as young age, anxiety, anger, self-esteem, or cultural values, are responsible for the variance in the differences between the study variables and homosexual and heterosexual orientation (Ridge and Feeney 1998; Vanderlaan and Vasey 2009; Wells and Hansen 2003).

The Current Study

In light of these considerations, in this study, we aimed to address the relationship between attachment styles, emotional abuse, and sexual coercion and the role of gender in a sample of young adults who identify as lesbian and gay. In line with evolutionary psychology studies, we hypothesized that the relationship between attachment, sexual coercion, and emotional abuse is similar in both heterosexuals and same-sex couples, and in line with the attachment theory, we assumed that attachment style could explain the different ways couples in these relationships live (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991a; Brassard et al. 2009). In particular, a secure attachment is connected to lower levels of sexual coercion and emotional abuse; avoidant and anxious attachment are related to higher levels sexual coercion and emotional abuse, both acted and suffered. Finally, we expected to find an effect based on gender, which has been seen in previous studies (Gemberling et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2010; Wells and Hansen 2003).

Methods

Participants and procedure

For this study, we recruited 182 homosexual young adults, from 18 to 25 years old (58% females, $M=22.42$, $Sd=1.91$), from LGBT associations in the north of Italy through snowball sampling. We told them that questionnaires were voluntary and that responses were anonymous and confidential. Participants signed a consent form, which explained the research aims and participants' rights. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical norms approved by the Italian Psychology Association and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards and with ethical norms of the research. Inclusion criteria were being in a romantic homosexual relationship for at least 6 months and identifying as homosexual.

Measures

A set of questionnaires included a background information questionnaire that aimed to obtain demographic and social information about age, nationality, and relationship duration.

Participants were asked to evaluate their sexual orientation using the Kinsey scale (Kinsey et al. 1948), which ranged from 1 (*exclusively heterosexual*) to 7 (*exclusively homosexual*). We also added point 0, which corresponded to being asexual, and only questionnaires of people who rated their orientation on points 6 and 7 were considered for this work. Attachment was evaluated using the Italian version of the attachment style questionnaire (Feeney et al. 1994; Fossati et al. 2003), a 40-item, self-administered questionnaire that assesses five dimensions of attachment on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The questionnaire is based on Bartholomew's (1990) and Hazan and Shaver's (1987) theories on romantic attachment and is composed of five subscales: confidence (item example is *I feel at ease in emotional relationships* and represents a *secure attachment*); discomfort with closeness (composed of items such as *I would like to have close relationships with other people but I find it difficult to fully trust them*, thus assessing an *avoidant attachment*); need for approval (an example is *I am often afraid that other people don't like me*, which assesses a *pre-occupied attachment*); preoccupation with relationships (connected to an *anxious/ambivalent attachment*; an example item is *I am afraid that I will be deceived when I get too close with others*); and relationships as being secondary (assessing a *dismissing attachment*, and an example of item is *I like to be self-sufficient*). The Cronbach's alpha for this study ranged from .75 to .89.

Emotional abuse was measured using the multidimensional measure of emotional abuse (Bonechi and Tani 2011; Murphy and Hoover 1999), which is a multifactor, 28-items, self-report questionnaire that assesses four subtypes of psychological abuse for suffered emotional abuse (victimization) and acted emotional abuse (perpetrated): restrictive engulfment, denigration, hostile withdrawal, and dominance/intimidation. Participants were asked to use a 7-point Likert scale to rate how frequently they or their partners exhibit specific behaviors, such as "Called you/your partner a loser, failure, or similar term" (denigration); "Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something in front of you/your partner" (dominance/intimidation); "Searching through each other's personal effects" (restrictive engulfment), and "Refuse to discuss a problem" (hostile withdrawal). For this study, we used the two total variables (suffered and acted emotional abuse). The internal consistency for this study ranged from .73 to .89.

The sexual coercion in intimate relationship scale (Shackelford and Goetz 2005) was used to assess sexual coercion in couples. The sexual coercion in intimate relationship scale is a self-assessment questionnaire composed of 34 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (0=*Never happened*, 7=*Happened more than 11 times*), and this specific version measured how frequently coercive behaviors were used to obtain sexual intercourse. Behaviors are grouped under three subscales: resource manipulation/violence, commitment defection, and manipulation threat. Examples of these items follow: "I told my partner that if she/he loved me, she/he should have had sex with me" (commitment defection); "I gave a gift to my or another's benefits

so that she/he felt obligated to have sex with me” (resource manipulation); and “I made my partner feel obligated to have sex with me” (manipulation threat). The original version of the scale was designed to assess sexual coercion in heterosexual partners, but we made it available for homosexual couples by adding “him or her” in the sentences. The internal consistency for this research ranged from .87 to .92.

Analysis Plan

Descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS 23 (IBM 2012), and the means and standard deviation (Sd) for the study variables are reported in Table 1. We conducted one structural equation model in Mplus version 8. Specifically, this model aims to investigate research questions 1 and 2: whether the dimensions of attachment are connected with emotional abuse (suffered and acted) and the dimensions of sexual coercion. Preliminary analyses tested whether the model fit would improve when the model was run separately based on gender. The model fit decreased in the multigroup model, then the structural equation model was run with gender as a covariate to account for the role of gender in the process. In this model, we included the intercorrelations among independent and dependent variables.

Results

The structural equation model fit the data well ($CFI=1.00$; $RMSEA=0$; $X^2(40)=548.868$; $p=.000$). The whole model is shown in Fig. 1.

The model shows how confidence is connected with commitment defection in marriage ($\beta=-.17$; $p<.05$), manipulation ($\beta=-.22$; $p<.01$), and acted emotional abuse ($\beta=.181$; $p<.001$). Discomfort with closeness is connected with coercion of resources and violence ($\beta=-.20$; $p<.01$). Need for approval is connected with

Table 1 Means and standard deviations for the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD
<i>ASQ</i>		
Confidence	30.77	6.49
Discomfort with closeness	36.40	6.89
Relationships as secondary	15.58	5.25
Need for approval	25.40	7.49
Preoccupation with relationships	30.21	7.15
<i>SCIRS</i>		
Violence	.98	4.52
Commitment	2.59	6.24
Manipulation	1.21	4.27
Total	4.99	14.00
<i>MMEA</i>		
Acted emotional abuse	17.12	14.62
Suffered emotional abuse	18.65	15.88

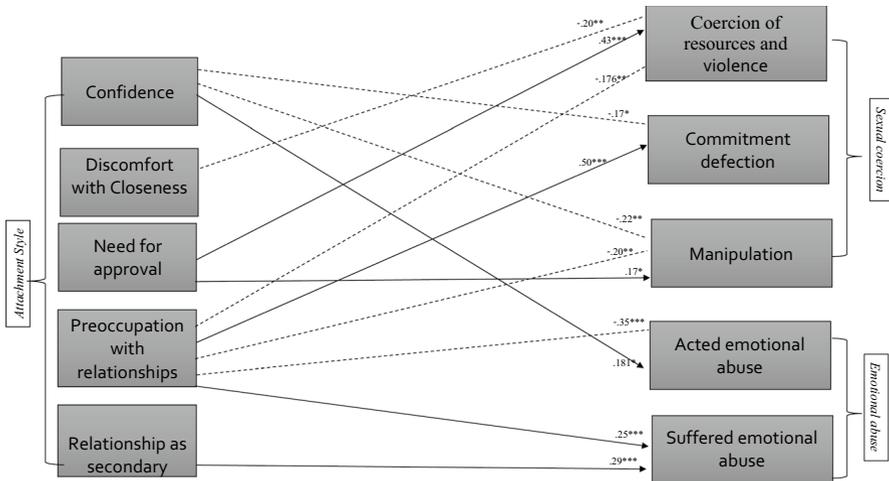


Fig. 1 Summary model. Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. The dashed lines denote negative associations

manipulation ($\beta = .17$; $p < .05$) and is strongly connected with coercion of resources and violence ($\beta = .43$; $p < .001$). Preoccupation with relationships is connected with coercion of resources and violence ($\beta = -.176$; $p < .01$) and with manipulation ($\beta = -.20$; $p < .05$); moreover, it is strongly connected with commitment defection ($\beta = .50$; $p < .001$), with acted emotional abuse ($\beta = -.35$; $p < .001$), and with suffered emotional abuse ($\beta = .25$; $p < .001$). The relationship being secondary is connected with suffered emotional abuse ($\beta = .29$; $p < .001$). Gender was inserted as an independent variable, and it did not produce significant effects.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to verify, in a group of gay and lesbian young adults, whether the dimensions of interpersonal attachment are connected to both sexual coercion and acted and suffered emotional abuse.

Our model suggests that high levels of self-confidence and trust in others are negatively connected to the coercion of marriage commitment and manipulation threat. These data highlight that lack of confidence in oneself increases the risk of sexual coercion and emotional abuse. In other words, in line with the evolutionary psychology framework and the attachment styles model, poor trust and insecurity can lead gay and lesbian people to threats related to economic sustenance as well as to enforcing coercive behaviors regarding possible sexual relationships with other people that oblige the partner to have sex with them.

Furthermore, the results underline that high levels of discomfort with closeness are negatively connected to the coercion of resources and violence. A person with high difficulty in intimate and authentic relationships with others will not be inclined to manipulate with coercive actions or physical violence because he or she

probably has internal operational models characterized by avoidance, preventing the establishment of intimate relationships. Consequently, avoiding relationships makes it difficult to be a perpetrator of sexual coercion or interpersonal violence. This is in line with our hypothesis and with the extant literature on heterosexuals (Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick 1997; Yarkovsky 2017). The need for approval is positively connected with the coercion of resources and violence and with the manipulation threat. These data, in line with the attachment theory, suggest that the internal operational models of fear of losing the beloved object or of never being enough are linked to the risk of coercive and violent actions, perpetrated but maybe also suffered. In this sense, satisfying the partner's sexual needs or using control to manipulate the partner might become a tool to contain the fear of never being adequate in the relationship. This is in line with our hypothesis and with the literature on preoccupied attachment (Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick 1997; Yarkovsky 2017).

Moreover, preoccupation with relationships is negatively connected to the coercion of resources and violence, and it is positively connected to manipulation and commitment defection. These data underline that a relational style characterized by anxiety and ambivalence reduces the risk of manipulation. However, these same internal working models of attachment characterized by anxiety and an intense fear of losing the partner could lead a person to enact coercive behaviors aimed at manipulating his or her partner to have sexual relations with him or her. In this sense, control and coercion become a means of maintaining the relationship, which also happens among heterosexual couples (Dutton et al. 1994; Kasian and Painter 1992; Yarkovsky 2017).

Moreover, the model highlights that high levels of trust in one's own (self-confidence) and others' ability to have satisfying relationships are connected with acted emotional abuse. These data underline that extreme trust in one's ability to have the control to enter into a relationship can lead a person to manifest emotional psychological abuse behaviors. In other words, it is possible that the behavior of psychological abuse is characterized by levels of trust to maintain the relationship regardless of the forms of abuse. Internal working models characterized by extreme confidence and security can be transformed, in this sense, into psychological control involving denigration because the person is certain of his or her own ability to control the relationship and of himself or herself. At the same time, relationships being secondary is connected with emotional abuse. A person who has introjected dysfunctional internal working models, which lead to the awareness of living superficial relationships and not asking for help because this means that he or she has failed, might be prone to be an emotional victim of abuse in relationships. In this sense, the individual might introject the idea that abuse is the only maladaptive solution to maintain a relationship, as occurs with heterosexual couples (D'Urso et al. 2019; Dutton et al. 1994; Yarkovsky 2017). Furthermore, it can be deduced that dysfunctional relational functioning in this sense can lead to being prone to victimization because the request for help would be seen as a failure and therefore not convenient because it would mean a person was admitting that he or she is not capable of living relationships, thus being unable to establish an intimate relationship with his or her partner.

Finally, preoccupation with relationships is negatively connected with acted emotional abuse and positively associated with suffered emotional abuse. These data

suggest that high levels of anxiety in interpersonal relationships can turn into emotional abuse immediately because the person might have introjected dysfunctional internal working models of anxiety about losing the relationship. Therefore, emotional abuse by the partner might become the only solution to maintain the relationship. At the same time, however, high levels of anxiety reduce the tendency to act emotional abuse. This might underline that a person focused on the fear and anxiety of losing the relationship is not inclined to act emotional abuse. In other words, internal working models characterized by anxiety represent a risk factor associated with emotional abuse. This aspect is in contrast with the findings of previous studies on heterosexual couples (Dutton et al. 1994; Kasian and Painter 1992) but confirms results about abusive behavior related to discomfort and anxiety in couples composed of gay or lesbian people (Gemberling et al. 2015; Wells and Hansen 2003). Indeed, researchers have suggested that a person with an anxious style has more difficulty recognizing and leaving a violent and coercive partner (e.g., Landolt and Dutton 1997). In particular, it is possible that gay and lesbian people are overwhelmed by loss anxiety because it can be linked to the fear of losing the partner, which, once the relationship is over, might lead to the disclosure of his or her sexual orientation.

In this study, therefore, we suggest that interpersonal attachment can be related to coercive behaviors and emotional abuse acts, without differences between genders. In line with the hypothesis of evolutionary theory and with the results of this study, it can be deduced that the psycho-relational functioning of gay and lesbian people is the same as that of heterosexual people. In other words, the dysfunctional interpersonal attachment models of gay and lesbian people affect the possibility of coercive actions and psychological emotional abuse, as with heterosexual people, independently of gender differences.

Limitations of the present study must be discussed. First of all, the use of self-report questionnaires could increase levels of social desirability. Additionally, the study was cross-sectional and, therefore, it was not possible to take measurements at different times. Future researchers could investigate these variables over time, as well as through different methodologies and perspectives. In this sense, longitudinal research will be important in particular to establish directionality. It seems plausible that experiences of coercion or emotional abuse could modulate to anxious or avoidant attachment styles, and vice versa. Furthermore, we conducted the study with a group of gay and lesbian participants recruited through convenience sampling throughout Italy. Hence, the results cannot be generalized and extended to other cultures and contexts. Future researchers could therefore highlight whether the proposed model is also applicable in different sociocultural contexts. Finally, because previous studies indicated an important role of personal variables, such as self-concept and personality traits, future researchers should address the relationships between the studied variables and personal aspects.

Ultimately, in this study, we proposed a useful model for those working in clinical contexts to define intervention models that analyze those psycho-relational factors to work on to reduce the risk of coercion and emotional abuse. We also suggested how and which relational styles can be considered more as risk and protection factors. Studying these factors is important for proper interventions on abuse and couple coercion so that the key factors to work on and focus on for the effectiveness of the

intervention itself are highlighted (Di Blasio 2005). Furthermore, identifying any related dysfunctions allows us to emphasize the proximate risks for the individual and for the couple and their functioning to prevent victimization. Moreover, in the present research, we analyzed a phenomenon in a group of minorities through the application of theories and evolutionary models that highlight that the interpersonal psychological functioning of gay and lesbian people does not differ from that of heterosexual people.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent A written informed consent, reporting research's aims and participant's rights, was obtained for all participants.

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