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EFFECTS OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT AND ROMANTIC INTIMACY AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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EFFECTS OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANT
ATTACHMENT AND ROMANTIC INTIMACY AMONG ADOLESCENTS

By

Selina Johnson

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By

Selina Johnson

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for supporting me through my educational journey. During the difficult times of my educational and dissertation process, you all have encouraged me to keep going. Thank you for supporting me through this journey and allowing me to continue my education.

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EFFECTS OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT AND ROMANTIC INTIMACY AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Abstract

By Selina Johnson

University of the Pacific
2022

Adolescence is a time when interacting with the opposite sex tends to increase and become more serious, and romantic relationships start to form. However, for some adolescents, specifically adolescents who have an avoidant state of mind in regards to attachment, romantic relationships and particularly intimacy is an experience they may find challenging. Given the importance of intimacy in an adolescent's life, this study proposes to investigate whether the quality of peer relationships can influence romantic intimacy among adolescents with an avoidant attachment. Friendship quality was chosen as a mediating variable in the present study to examine if the quality of peer relationships positively influences the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy among adolescents. Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) Is avoidant attachment linked to the quality of peer relationships among adolescents? (2) Do peer relationships mediate the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy among adolescents?

While it is known that avoidant attachment negatively impacts romantic intimacy, there is contradicting evidence suggesting that attachment influences the quality of peer relationships (Boling et al., 2011; Ducharme et al., 2002; Groh et al., 2014; Kerns, 1996; Markiewicz et al., 2001; Schwarz et al., 2012). Some studies show that individuals with an avoidant attachment tend to have difficulty creating and maintaining satisfactory peer relationships and friendships

while other studies found no evidence that attachment impacts peer relationships or friendship quality (Boling et al., 2011; Kerns et al., 1996; Schwarz et al., 2012). This study will investigate whether adolescents with an avoidant attachment have poorer quality of peer relationships and whether peer relationships have a positive effect on the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy in adolescence. This study will analyze data collected from the National Institute of Child Health and Development – Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Structural equation models will be used to test the possibility of quality of peer relationships as a mediator for the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Intimacy is essential and natural for humans. Humans strive to connect, interact, and disclose with one another. Intimacy allows for positive and healthy romantic relationships as well as peer relationships (Arnett et al., 2014). During adolescence, adolescents begin to develop close intimate friendships and romantic relationships. However, for adolescents with an avoidant attachment, building close intimate friendships and romantic relationships is something they find difficult and unattainable (Ducharme et al., 2002; Guerrero, 1996). Adolescents who lack intimacy in their friendships may be vulnerable feelings of sadness, loneliness, worthlessness, and alienation (Buhrmester, 1990; Hirsch, 2004). The lack of intimacy may also increase feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Hirsch, 2004). Moreover, depending on the attachment orientation, adolescents exhibit differing patterns of emotional regulation and coping skills during stressful times (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). As a result, since adolescents with an avoidant attachment deny, block, and suppress their emotions, it is common for adolescents with an avoidant attachment to develop depression or depressive symptoms (Buhrmester, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Also, because adolescents with an avoidant attachment have a history of unresponsive caregivers, it may lead to more negative experiences and emotions in their close relationships (Simpson et al., 2007) resulting in depression or depressive symptoms. Some theorists have attributed the low self-esteem and the high levels of dysfunctional attitudes harbored by avoidant individuals to the link between avoidant attachment and depression (Roberts et al., 1996).

Statement of the Problem

While there is a considerable amount of research examining the lack of intimacy in adolescents with avoidant attachment and its effects (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bradford et al., 2002; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Guerrero, 1998), the influence peer relationships have on the relationship between adolescents with avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy has not been thoroughly examined. It is possible that peer relationships could positively influence individuals with avoidant attachment who lack intimacy in their romantic relationships since it has been discovered that friendships can influence romantic relationship involvement, stability, and quality among adolescence (Connolly et al., 2000; Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017; Orina et al., 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2004). However, there is also some contradicting evidence that argues attachment is not linked to the quality of peer relationships at all (Boling et al., 2011; Kerns et al., 1996; Schwarz et al., 2012).

In all three studies, researchers investigated if attachment is correlated to the quality of friendships by measuring attachment and positive and negative friendship features. Boling et al., (2011) and Kerns et al., (1996) had participants report on only one friendship. The limited friendships that were reported on may explain why no relationship was found between attachment and friendship. Both studies failed to report on the significance of that particular friendship as well. Future researchers should assess the relationship with a significant friend such as a best friend or assess multiple friends to evaluate whether attachment is linked to the quality of friendships. Schwarz et al., (2012) found no correlation between self-reported friendship quality and attachment which may be due to the age of the participants. The participants were fourth grade students with the mean age of 10 years old. Due to their immature

age, it may be difficult for this age group to assess for the quality of their friendships. Future researchers should include older participants who have more experience in friendships.

Accordingly, this study will use adolescent aged participants who will have more knowledge and experience to assess for their friendships. This study will also assess a best friendship relationship in order to measure the theoretical construct most likely related to attachment security. This study aims to examine if avoidant attachment is linked to the quality of peer relationships and the effect the quality of peer relationships can have on the relationship between romantic intimacy and avoidant attachment in adolescents. It is important to investigate if avoidant attachment is linked to the quality of peer relationships because current research findings are contradictory. Further investigation on this relationship, may allow us to determine if avoidant attachment influences peer relationships and if peer relationships can positively influence the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy among adolescents.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was originally proposed by Bowlby (1980) describing the emotional bond between caregiver and child. Bowlby proposed that an attachment system develops during the first few months of the infant's life. Infants have an innate drive to attach to a caregiver who responds sensitively and appropriately to their needs while offering warmth, security, and safety in order to protect them against threatening or dangerous conditions (Collins & Read, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). When the infant is under stress, they look for their caregiver to be close and responsive to their needs. The caregiver's response and interaction with their infant directly impacts the organization of the infant's attachment. It also impacts how the infant

will react and respond to their caregivers and the use of the caregiver as a base for exploration (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Sroufe, 1979).

Ainsworth et al. (1978) expanded upon Bowlby's research and identified three patterns of infant attachment including secure, anxious, and avoidant. These patterns come from the caregiver's physical and emotional response and availability to the infant, in particular, the infant's signals of need. In other words, depending on the availability, sensitivity, and responsiveness of the parent, the infant will develop a corresponding attachment pattern (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Collins & Read, 1990; Grau & Doll, 2003).

Infants who are classified as secure had caregivers who were sensitive to their infant's needs and responded efficiently and appropriately. Infants with a secure attachment welcome their caretaker's return after a separation and if distressed, they will seek closeness, are comforted immediately, and develop a sense of attachment security (Stanton et al., 2017). These infants have the competence and desire to explore their environments (George, 2014).

Infants classified as ambivalent had caregivers who inconsistently responded to their infant's needs. These caregivers responded effectively to their child when under stress at times and other times were unavailable (Stanton et al., 2017). These infants show mixed and uncertain behavior towards their caregivers and are resistant to being comforted when the caregiver returns after a separation (Sroufe, 1979). The primary form of defense for ambivalent infants is cognitive distortion which allows the infant to separate from negative emotions to allow for a more positive state (George, 2014).

Infants classified as avoidant had caregivers who were emotionally unavailable and unresponsive to their infant's needs. Because seeking closeness with their caregiver is ineffective and may result in rejection, these individuals avoid or limit closeness and interaction

with the caregivers on return after a separation (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Grau & Doll, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Li & Chan, 2012). On reunion, infants with an avoidant attachment exhibit many different behaviors including crawling away, looking away, or ignoring (Sroufe, 1979). These infants can easily detach from their caregivers and they do not always seek contact from the caregiver which disrupts the return to active exploration (Sroufe, 1979). Moreover, infants with an avoidant attachment tend to disengage when environments or situations become stressful (Sroufe, 1979). Furthermore, in a problem-solving situation, Sroufe (1979) found that infants with an avoidant attachment were less enthusiastic, less persistent, ignored more, and did not comply with maternal suggestions. In a following study, it was discovered that infants with an avoidant attachment exhibited low involvement in problem-solving (Sroufe, 1979). For the purposes of this study, we will primarily be focusing on avoidant attachment.

Researchers Hazan and Shaver (1987) have argued that attachment type can predict romantic relationships. They have used attachment theory as a framework for better understanding romantic relationships and romantic love since love is a, “process of becoming attached that shares important similarities with child-caretaker attachment” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 523). They believe that romantic love is an attachment process that is reflected within the three attachment classifications. Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that the different forms of attachment impact the way an individual experiences love as measured by self-report. For instance, they found that secure individuals experience happiness, trust, and friendship within their relationships, while insecure individuals including anxious and avoidant, experienced emotional highs and lows, jealousy, and obsession within their relationships. Hazan and Shaver (1987) further found that insecure individuals reported more negative experiences and beliefs

about love, had a history of shorter romantic relationships, and provided poor descriptions of their childhood relationships with parents compared to secure individuals.

It should be noted that there are significant differences in findings from studies using measures of mental representation of attachment versus self-report. Self-report measures are more susceptible to the influence of defensive processes. For example, individuals who are dismissing (the adult corollary to avoidance in infants) often rate themselves as secure (Mikulincer, 1995).

Research Questions

To help guide the research, the following research questions are presented: (1) Is avoidant attachment linked to the quality of peer relationships among adolescents? (2) Do peer relationships mediate the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy among adolescents?

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that avoidant attachment was linked to the quality of peer relationships. Adolescents with an avoidant attachment tend to view others as insensitive and have difficulty trusting and opening up to others. This may be problematic for the development and maintenance of peer relationships which may result in poor quality friendships. Since the IWM of adolescents with an avoidant attachment are shaped by the infant's early experiences, it is possible that these early experiences will guide their current experiences regarding friendships and influence how they perceive their friendships. It is also important to note that the IWM is still capable of being reworked and can be shaped by positive peer relationships as well by shifting their perceptions of others. Even though adolescents with avoidant attachment may have a difficult time forming high quality peer relationships they are still capable.

It was also hypothesized that the quality of peer relationships would mediate the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy in adolescents. Although individuals with an avoidant attachment have a more difficult time building quality friendships, they are still capable of building peer relationships even though they may not be of high quality. Friendships allow adolescents to learn essential skills needed for a successful romantic relationship including trust, intimacy, empathy, and conflict resolution. In addition, adolescents who have high quality friendships tend to have high quality romantic relationships as well. Since the IWM has the potential to be reworked and shaped, it is possible that adolescents with an avoidant attachment who have a positive friendship and experiences with their peers can alter their IWM, and they may begin to perceive others including their friends and romantic partners as trustworthy and dependable. This may guide future experiences with others to a more positive perspective resulting in the development of intimacy and closeness in their romantic relationships.

Significance of the Study

It is important for adolescents with an avoidant attachment to receive and give intimacy in romantic relationships despite their early experiences with their caregiver. Intimacy allows for individuals to feel safe and emotionally connected with one another person. Without intimacy, individuals may be vulnerable to depression and/or depressive symptoms. This study's finding contributes to attachment and development as it will determine if avoidant attachment is linked to peer relationships and if peer relationships can improve the quality of intimacy in romantic relationships among adolescents with an avoidant attachment. This will result in adolescents with an avoidant attachment better understanding the importance of peer relationships to improve their intimacy in their romantic relationships.

Summary

This study examined the effect avoidant attachment has on the quality of peer relationships and the effect the quality of peer relationships can have on the relationship between romantic intimacy and avoidant attachment among adolescents. It is important to investigate this topic because adolescents who do not develop intimacy may encounter a mental health disorder. Avoidant attachment can predict the quality of one's romantic relationships which results in low quality romantic relationships. It is possible that peer relationships can positively influence the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic relationships resulting in high quality romantic relationships.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Continuity of Attachment From Infancy to Adolescence

Bowlby (1982) has suggested that one of the mechanisms for the continuity of attachment is through the infant's development of an internal working model (IWM) of self and other that is maintained, although modifiable, throughout the lifespan. Bowlby (1982) proposed that a child's attachment working model is developed over time as a function of the infant's attachment experiences and cognitive development. The IWM of self and others in attachment relationships help the caregiver and infant to predict, clarify, and guide interactions with partners (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Furthermore, the IWM is used to organize new experiences and decide how future attachment experiences will be perceived and actualized (Pinquart et al., 2013). The IWM is thought to act as guide to organize current attachment experiences while also filtering future attachment experiences (Pinquart et al., 2013). Additionally, IWM emphasizes the idea that experiences and memories have the ability to be "reworked" and have the potential to be shaped (Pinquart et al., 2013). For example, changes in the caregiving environment such as a divorce can result in changes to the IWM.

Mikulincer et al., (2009) proposed three main defense mechanisms that individuals with an avoidant attachment engage in to protect themselves. The first defense mechanism is avoiding any emotions, images, thoughts, or memories that could activate the attachment system that could result in them seeking comfort from an unresponsive attachment figure. The next defense mechanism is sustaining an embellished ego and privilege while blocking any emotions, images, thoughts, or memories that would suggest weakness or vulnerability. This allows the individual with an avoidant attachment to be less tempted to rely on others for support. The last

defense mechanism is belittling others since avoidant defenses are motivated by negative views of others and unwillingness to acknowledge the positive characteristics and behaviors of others. This results in individuals with an avoidant attachment not noticing when their partners show support and love. The goal that individuals with an avoidant attachment have with these defense mechanisms is to protect themselves from experiencing or expressing feelings or needs that would activate their attachment system and to avoid situations that could result in feelings of vulnerability or abandonment (Mikulincer et al., 2009).

Intimacy

Intimacy is a basic human necessity and helps develop satisfying romantic relationships that will affect adolescence later in life (Arnett et al., 2014). It is an interpersonal and shared experience that involves feelings and attitudes (Williams et al., 2001). Reis and Shaver (1988) proposed one of the most well-known models of intimacy. This model emphasizes that intimacy is experienced when a significant other self discloses important and relevant information to their partner which the partner responds with positive regard. When the partner responds empathetically to their significant other who self-disclosed, it is through the discloser's perception of how their partner responded that they will feel understood, validated, and accepted. It is through this process of self-disclosure by each individual in the romantic relationship that allows for a mutual experience of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Furthermore, Laurenceau et al., (1998) found that self-disclosure predicted intimacy and that disclosure of personal information and emotions within a romantic relationship were perceived as the highest form of intimacy (Lippert & Prager, 2001).

In addition, when researchers Mackey et al., (1997) asked individuals in romantic relationships to describe intimacy, they described intimacy as being able to disclose their

personal thoughts and feelings to their partner and having those thoughts and feelings accepted and validated by their partner. Marston et al., (1998) further found that individuals in romantic relationships identified experiencing intimacy as engaging in sex, being open (i.e., self-disclosure and acceptance), showing affection (e.g., hugging and kissing), being supportive, being together (e.g., closeness), and engaging in quiet company (i.e., spending time together without talking). Intimacy enhances one's partners' well-being (DeWall et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2014) by increasing self-esteem, safety, satisfaction with life and one's romantic partner, happiness, and achievement (Davila et al., 2017; Yoo et al., 2014).

Adolescence is the time where teenagers start to explore relationships with the opposite sex and intense romantic feelings start to develop. Having romantic relationships during adolescence is very common and plays a significant role in the lives of many adolescents (Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017). Kochendorfer and Kerns (2017) found that 20 to 25 percent of 12-year old's and 44 to 50 percent of 15-year old's reported being involved in romantic relationships either in the past or currently. Furthermore, as romantic relationships begin to form during adolescence, intimacy also begins to grow and expand (Shulman et al., 1997) and by late adolescence, intimacy is at its peak (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

Avoidant Attachment and Intimacy

As previously discussed, researchers have used infant attachment theory as a framework to explain the relationship between intimacy and parent child interactions (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The type of attachment experienced as a child directly impacts the quality of one's romantic relationship and involvement (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1980; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017) and foreshadows both positive and negative relationships (Madey & Rodgers, 2009). While adolescents with secure and avoidant attachment

both had dating experiences by age 16, Sroufe et al., (2005) found that secure individuals are more likely to be involved in more long-term romantic relationships, while avoidant individuals are more likely to be in short-term relationships. Although their relationships are short, these individuals tend to seek out romantic relationships to compensate for the lack of closeness and warmth that they did not experience from their caregivers (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017).

In relationships, individuals with an avoidant attachment have low levels of intimacy, self-disclosure, warmth, and caregiving that is carried over from childhood to adolescence to adulthood (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bradford et al., 2002; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Guerrero, 1998). These individuals tend to look at their other relationships, either familial or friendship, for support instead of their romantic partners and are not willing to offer support, care, or warmth to their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson et al., 1992). Individuals with an avoidant attachment believe that others will not be able or willing to meet their needs resulting in avoidance of intimacy (Guerrero, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). It was later discovered that this belief causes these individuals to have difficulty trusting their partners and feeling confident in their relationship resulting in less commitment and emotional dependence in their intimate relationships as well as relationship dissatisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Li & Chan, 2012; Marshall, 2010). During conflict, these individuals can be hostile as they don't have the skills to regulate emotions in which make it more difficult to effectively interact and solve conflict with their partners (Cassidy, 2001; Domingue & Mollen, 2009).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) found that individuals with an avoidant attachment reported using strategies to deactivate their attachment needs. For example, these individuals

will distance themselves to protect themselves from getting hurt, to avoid closeness, and suppress their attachment needs. This often leads to disengagement, emotional loneliness, and isolation (Guerrero, 1998; Marshall, 2010; Simpson et al., 1992; Solomon, 2009).

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships can be defined as a group of people who enjoy spending time together and share similar interests (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). In adolescence, peer relationships form with both same and opposite genders as they are spending a lot of time with their peers in and out of school. This allows the opportunity for peer relationships to develop into close friendships as well as romantic relationships. For adolescents, forming peer relationships serves many purposes. For example, peer relationships allow adolescents to build companionship, empathy, and problem-solving strategies (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). These characteristics allow adolescents to understand how to be a good friend, peer, and romantic partner. Additionally, peer relationships allow for adolescents to feel valued and develop a sense of belonging and security as they are interacting with others who are similar to them (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020).

Avoidant Attachment and Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are very important for adolescents as it allows them to feel accepted, belonged, and important. However, adolescents with an avoidant attachment tend to struggle creating and maintaining high quality peer relationships. Moreover, researchers have also used the infant attachment theory as a way to examine how parent infant attachment, specifically avoidant attachment, can affect peer relationships and the quality of friendships (Ducharme et al., 2002; Groh et al., 2014; Kerns, 1996; Markiewicz et al., 2001). For example, Saferstein et al., (2005) found that when it comes to peer relationship quality, individuals with an avoidant attachment reported low levels of companionship, security, and expectations. In addition,

individuals with an avoidant attachment feel uncomfortable interacting among their peers, exploring their environments, and tend to have difficulty developing friendships (Ducharme et al., 2002). These individuals find it difficult to relate and effectively interact with their peers resulting in more negative interactions with their peers and higher levels of conflict (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999; Ducharme et al., 2002; Marshall, 2010; McElwain et al., 2011; Saferstein et al., 2005; Sroufe et al., 1999).

Additionally, individuals with an avoidant attachment tend to have more negative interactions because they learn to view themselves and others in a negative way (Ducharme et al., 2002) given their parent child interactions. For example, Cassidy et al., (1996) found that individuals with an avoidant attachment view their peers as untrustworthy and insensitive which may influence these individuals to behave less favorably towards their peers. Given these characteristics of individuals with an avoidant attachment in peer relationships, these individuals exhibit poor friendship quality compared to the other attachments resulting in low quality relationships (Ducharme et al., 2002; Marshall, 2010).

Contrary to these studies is the work of Boling et al., (2011), Kerns et al., (1996), and Schwarz et al., (2012) who found that parent child attachment did not predict peer relationships or friendship quality among adolescents. However, this may have to do with the age of the participants, instruments used, significance of friendship, and the limited number of friendships investigated. For example, Boling et al., (2011) and Kerns et al., (1996) did not report on the significance of the friendship examined in which may explain why no significance was found. While Schwarz et al., (2012) investigated a young age group who may be unaware of what a quality friendship consists of. In short, there is contradicting evidence regarding attachment and its linkage to peer relationships.

Intimacy and Peer Relationships

Adolescence is a developmental period in which spending time with peers tends to increase and as they spend more time with their friends, their relationships become more intimate (Buhrmester, 1990). For many adolescents, this is a time where they are beginning to experience their first love, their first kiss, or first date (Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1995). It is a time where peer relationships influence romantic relationship involvement and quality among adolescents (Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017). Adolescents become more fascinated by romance and relationships and begin to engage in more intimate interactions with the opposite sex (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011) resulting in close, open, and long-lasting friendships (Bukowski et al., 2009).

Friendships can influence romantic relationship involvement, stability, and quality among adolescents (Connolly et al., 2000; Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2017; Orina et al., 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2004) because friendships allow adolescents to learn important skills needed for a successful romantic relationship including trust, conflict resolution, warmth, intimacy, and openness (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). In addition to the skills learned in friendships, friendships can also teach and shape an adolescent's expectations in romantic relationships (Rauer et al., 2013). Moreover, adolescents who have successful, close, and intimate friendships tend to have high quality romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2009) while adolescents who have unsuccessful friendships are susceptible to poor romantic relationships (Vitaro et al., 2009). These individuals may become involved in romantic relationships early in an attempt to seek out intimacy and closeness that is missing from their friendships (Furman & Wehner, 1997).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study utilized data from the National Institute of Child Health and Development's (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD). The SECCYD is a longitudinal study in which includes information on 1,364 children from the years of 1991 to 2007. This study was collected from a variety of participants from different backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and ethnicities including 82 percent White, 12 percent African American, 4 percent other, 1 percent Asian, Aleutian, or Eskimo, and less than 1 percent American Indian. In addition, 6 percent were identified as Hispanic. This study collected data from 10 sites across the United States (Charlottesville, VA; Irvine, CA; Lawrence, KS; Little Rock, AR; Madison, WI; Morganton, NC; Philadelphia, PA; Seattle, WA; and Wellesley, MA).

The study consists of four phases: Phase I consists of information from 1 month to three years, Phase II consists of information from age four to first grade, Phase III consists of information from second grade to sixth grade, and Phase IV consists of information from seventh grade to high school. Phase I data was used in the current study to examine infant attachment as well as Phase IV data which includes adolescents from age 12-15 to examine adolescent romantic relationships and peer relationships.

Instruments

Avoidant attachment. The "Strange Situation" was used to obtain information about avoidant attachment. For this study children who are 15 months with an avoidant attachment will be analyzed. This instrument consisted of mothers and children being videotaped in an unfamiliar playroom to increase the children's stress resulting in the activation of the children's

attachment system for three minutes. In the first two episodes, the mother and child become acquainted with the playroom while the child is encouraged to play with the toys. Then, an unfamiliar female enters the playroom quietly. After about a minute, the female interacts with the mother and then after another minute passes, the female tries to engage with the child. At the third minute, the mother leaves the room. After three minutes, the mother returns. If the child is distressed, then the separation time is reduced. Then, three minutes later, the mother leaves the playroom again in which the child is left alone for those three minutes. If the child is distressed the episode is shortened and the stranger returns to the playroom. If the stranger is unable to comfort the child after three minutes the mother returns.

The videotape of the Strange Situation is observed by a trained coder. The children's behaviors are rated in each of the reunions: Proximity and Contact Seeking; Contact Maintaining Resistance; and Avoidance. The organization of the child's attachment and exploratory behaviors, especially in the reunion episodes, are analyzed and classified into one of three major classifications: Secure (Group B), insecure-avoidant (Group A), and insecure-resistant (Group C). Secure infants use the mother as a secure base for exploration, seek comfort when distressed, and can return to exploration after they are comforted. Avoidant infants display avoidance with the reunion of the mother even when comforted. They are typically not distressed by separation but if they do become distressed it is likely due to them being alone and not due to the absence of the mother. Resistant infants are distressed by the separation of the mother and display proximity seeking behaviors at the reunion with the mother. In addition to attachment codes, several other behaviors were rated on seven-point scales including Proximity and Contact Seeking, Contact Maintaining, Resistance, and Avoidance. For this study, the average of Avoidance scores at episodes 5 and 8 were used.

The Strange Situation has been validated by many studies involving home observations (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Belsky et al., 1984). These studies found that infants who were classified as securely attached at one year had experienced more sensitive mothering during the first year of life. The "D" classification has not yet been validated by a home study. However, there is evidence that children with this- classification, or their parents, have experienced attachment-related trauma (Carlson et al., 1989). There is substantial evidence that attachment security, as measured by the Strange Situation, predicts later competence in relationship and attachment-related domains (George & Main, 1979; Sroufe, 2005). There is also evidence of stability for infants who are 12-18 months, in Strange Situation classifications for the traditional ABC classifications for infants from low-risk families (Main & Weston, 1981).

Romantic intimacy. The “Network of Relationships” inventory was used to obtain information about romantic intimacy and relationships. This inventory consists of a 43-item questionnaire that measures dating, love, and romantic relationships among adolescents. Information on adolescents aged 15 years old who are in a romantic relationship will only be used to look at the quality of intimacy in their romantic relationships. The raw items used to create the Companionship with Romantic Partner (Study Child) score had modest internal reliability (2 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .61). The raw items used to create the Conflict with Romantic Partner (Study Child) score had high internal reliability (3 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .88). The raw items used to create the Intimacy with Romantic Partner (Study Child) score had high internal reliability (3 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .87). The raw items used to create the Affection for Romantic Partner (Study Child) score had high internal reliability (3 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

Peer relationships. The “Friendship Quality” questionnaire was used to obtain information about peer relationships. This inventory consisted of a 29-item questionnaire designed to assess the perceptions of their friendship with their very best friend, regardless of how often the child sees that friend. The questionnaire measures six qualitative aspects of the friendship: Validation and Caring, Conflict Resolution, Conflict and Betrayal, Help and Guidance, Companionship and Recreation, and Intimate Exchange. The questionnaire utilizes a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 = not at all true to 5 = really true. The first 21 statements in this form are identical to the statements asked in the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (FQQ) used at Third, Fourth, and Fifth Grades. The last 8 items were new beginning at Sixth Grade and were chosen to be more suitable for use with adolescents. For this study Sixth Grade will be analyzed. For this sample, the raw items used to create the Companionship and Recreation Score had moderate internal reliability (8 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .76); the raw items used to create the Validation and Caring Score had high internal reliability (6 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .87); the raw items used to create the Help and Guidance Score had moderate internal reliability (5 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .83); the raw items used to create the Intimate Disclosure Score had high internal reliability (3 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .86); the raw items used to create the Conflict and Betrayal Score had moderate internal reliability (4 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .78); the raw items used to create the Conflict Resolution Score had moderate internal reliability (2 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .75); and the raw items used to create the Friendship Quality Total Score had high internal reliability (28 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .92).

Data Analysis

A multiple regression model was examined to determine the effects of peer relationships on adolescents with avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy. The independent variable was

adolescents with avoidant attachment and the dependent variable was romantic intimacy. The quality of peer relationships served as a mediator. Gender and socioeconomic status (SES) using the income-to-needs ratio was incorporated as control variables. To test for mediation, romantic intimacy was regressed on peer relationships, avoidant attachment, SES, and gender. Next, peer relationship was regressed on avoidant attachment, SES, and gender. Then, avoidant attachment was regressed on SES and gender. Lastly, a correlation between SES and gender was analyzed. If there was statistical significance in peer relationships being regressed on avoidant attachment and intimacy, then that would suggest that mediation exists between adolescents with avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The variables including gender and ethnicity of the participants are reported in Table 1 below. Among the 1,364 participants, fifty-eight percent of the participants identified as male and forty-eight of the participants identified as female. In addition, approximately less than one percent of the participants are American Indian, Eskimo, and/or Aleutian, approximately two percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, approximately thirteen percent are Black or African American, approximately eighty percent are White, and approximately five percent are from other ethnic backgrounds. Approximately ninety-four percent of the participants are Non-Hispanic while approximately six percent are Hispanic.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Gender and Ethnicity

	Number (N)	Percentage %
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	705	51.7%
Female	659	48.3%
Total	1364	100%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
American Indian, Eskimo, Aleutian	5	.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	22	1.6%
Black or African American	176	12.9%
White	1097	80.4%
Other	64	4.7%
Total	1364	100%
<i>Hispanic/Non-Hispanic</i>		
Non-Hispanic	1281	93.9%
Hispanic	83	6.1%
Total	1364	100%

This research was designed to determine if avoidant attachment influences the quality of peer relationships among adolescents and the subsequent influence peer relationships has on romantic intimacy. Three regression models were produced and analyzed. First, romantic intimacy was regressed on peer relationships, avoidant attachment, SES, and gender. The overall multiple regression was not statistically significant ($r^2 = .022$, $F[4,169] = .964$, $p = .429$), and the four variables (peer relationships, avoidant attachment, SES, and gender) accounted for 22% of the variance in romantic intimacy. None of the variables had a statistically significant effect on romantic intimacy. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for peer relationships was .400 ($t[169] = 1.051$, $p = .295$) indicating that peer relationships does not have a significant impact on romantic intimacy. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for avoidant attachment was -.141 ($t[169] = -.827$, $p = .409$) indicating that avoidant attachment does not have a significant impact on romantic intimacy. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for SES was -.097 ($t[169] = -.883$, $p = .379$) indicating that SES does not have a significant impact on romantic intimacy. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for gender was .435 ($t[169] = .901$, $p = .369$) indicating that gender does not have a significant impact on romantic intimacy.

Next, peer relationships was regressed on avoidant attachment, SES, and gender. The overall multiple regression was statistically significant ($r^2 = .073$, $F[3,883] = 23.126$, $p < .001$) and the three variables (avoidant attachment, SES, and gender) accounted for 73% of the variance in romantic intimacy. Two of the three independent variables had a statistically significant effect on peer relationships. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for avoidant attachment was -.035 ($t[883] = -2.671$, $p = .008$), meaning that adolescents whose attachment is identified as avoidant have poorer peer relationships. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for gender was .284 ($t[883] = 7.631$, $p < .001$), meaning that girls tend

to have more positive peer relationships. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for SES was not significant ($b = .004, t[883] = .521, p = .603$) indicating that SES does not have a significant impact on peer relationships.

Then, avoidant attachment was regressed on SES and gender. The overall multiple regression was statistically significant ($r^2 = .006, F[2,1110] = 3.614, p = .027$) and the two variables (SES and gender) accounted for 0.6% of the variance in avoidant attachment; however, only one of the two independent variables had a statistically significant effect on avoidant attachment. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for SES was $-.035 (t[1110] = -2.234, p = .026)$, indicating that adolescents from high SES backgrounds are less likely to be identified as avoidant. The unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for gender was not significant ($b = -.124, t[1110] = -1.461, p = .144$) indicating that gender does not have a significant impact on avoidant attachment. Lastly, a correlation analyzed between gender and SES. The correlation was not statistically significant, $p = .629$, suggesting that no correlation exists between gender and SES. Mediation analyses were not conducted because there were no significant direct effects from either Peer Relationships or Avoidant Attachment to Romantic Intimacy.

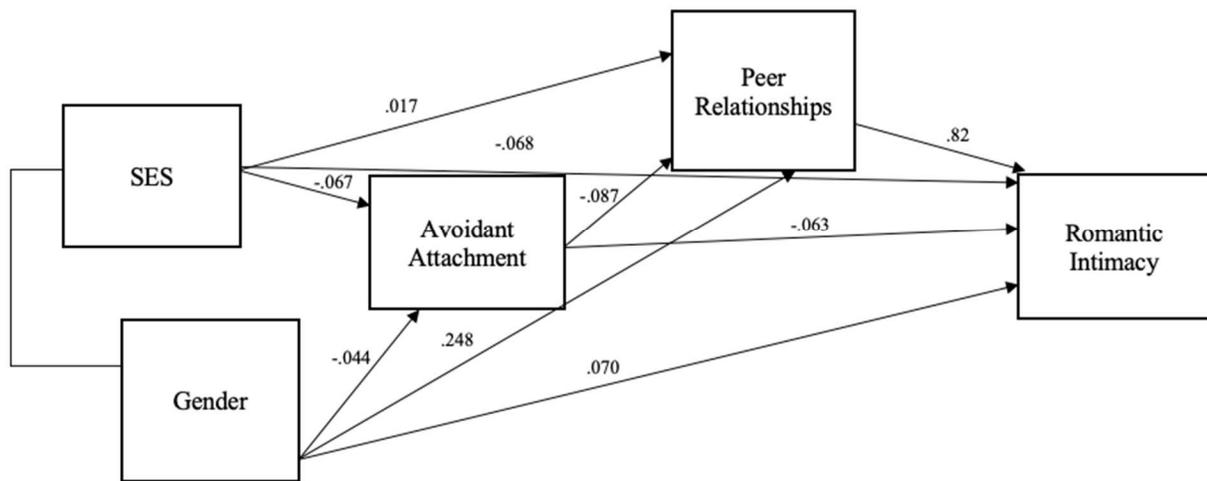


Figure 1: Results of the quality of peer relationships mediation model

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the results of this regression analysis study as it relates to previous research findings concerning avoidant attachment, peer relationships, and romantic intimacy while also discussing new findings. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research will be offered.

The first research question addressed whether avoidant attachment is linked to the quality of peer relationships among adolescents, and then whether peer relationships mediated the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy among adolescents. The results of this study found that having an avoidant attachment did have an effect on the quality of adolescent peer relationships. Adolescents with an avoidant attachment were found to have poorer peer relationships compared to adolescents with a secure attachment. This complements previous findings that indicate that avoidant attachment has a significant effect on the quality of peer relationships (Ducharme et al., 2002; Groh et al., 2014; Kerns, 1996; Markiewicz et al., 2001). In addition, Saferstein et al., (2005) found that adolescents with an avoidant attachment had poor relationship quality including low levels of companionship, expectations, and security.

Adolescents with an avoidant attachment have difficulty creating and maintaining friendships (Ducharme et al., 2002), have more negative conversations with their peers, and engage in more conflict (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999; Ducharme et al., 2002; Marshall, 2010; McElwain et al., 2011; Saferstein et al., 2005; Sroufe et al., 1999). This may be due to the defensive processes that are inherent to an individual with an avoidant attachment (Mikulincer et al., 2009). Individuals with an avoidant attachment engage in what Bowlby (1979) referred to as deactivation. Deactivation is a form of defensive exclusion to deactivate, diminish, dismiss, or

devalue attachment-related emotions, regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

Individuals with an avoidant attachment are not comfortable being vulnerable among their peers, and they avoid depending on friends for support (Mikulincer et al., 2009) which may result in poor quality friendships since the typical give-and-take in close relationships is missing.

Individuals with an avoidant attachment may also struggle to notice the positive traits of others which may result in difficulty viewing their peers favorably (Mikulincer et al., 2009). In addition, since individuals with an avoidant attachment have not experienced sensitive and responsive care, their IWM's are based on perceptions and expectations that they are not worthy of care, and that others will be rejecting. They may thus behave in ways that create a self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection (Bowlby, 1982).

The findings of the current study did not support findings from Boling et al., (2011), Kerns et al., (1996), and Schwarz et al., (2012) who found that parent child attachment did not predict peer relationships or friendship quality among adolescents. It should be noted that the aforementioned research used self-report measures versus the behavioral observation measures used in the current study and in other longitudinal research such as the Minnesota Longitudinal Study (Sroufe et al, 2005). The findings of the current study may be a function of the use of an older age group as well as the inclusion of a best friend relationship to measure peer relationships. This is in contrast to previous research which investigated more casual friendship relationships. It has also been argued that the nature of cross-sectional studies only allows for correlation at the time of the variables measured, while longitudinal studies allow for an investigation of influential variables over time (Grossmann et al., 2005). The findings that current peer relationships, for example, are better predictors than are parent-child attachment, are a function of peer relationships themselves being an outcome of earlier relationships (Sroufe et

al., 2005). The results of the current study support the hypothesis that suggested adolescents with an avoidant attachment tend to view others as insensitive and that they have difficulty trusting and opening up to others. The lack of intimacy inherent in an avoidant state of mind may impede the kind of close personal sharing that is characteristic of positive peer relationships.

It is worth noting that the results also found that gender influences the quality of peer relationships. Consistent with previous research, it was found that girls are more likely to have positive relationships compared to boys. Additionally, girls are more likely to value their peer relationships by adopting goals aimed at promoting the smooth functioning of relationships, and they tend to empathize with their friends more than boys (Rose et al., 2016). Rose et al., (2016) also found that girls have more positive relationships compared to boys because they disclose more to their friends which results in closeness and positive responses.

This study found that peer relationships did not affect romantic intimacy. This is in contrast to previous research that indicated that friendships directly impact romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2009). Specifically, high quality friendships result in intimate romantic relationships while low quality friendships result in poor romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2009; Vitaro et al., 2009). It could be argued that intimacy as a construct impacts both types of relationships. For example, individuals with an avoidant attachment are typically low on intimacy as a function of their early rejection of their signals of needs and vulnerability to their caregiver. Low intimacy may impact friendships as well as romantic relationships in a negative fashion. In contrast, individuals with a secure attachment have higher intimacy, which results in more positive friendships and romantic relationships. The current study hypothesized that friendships could facilitate the development, stability, and quality of romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Kochendorfer &

Kerns, 2017; Orina et al., 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2004). Friendships can allow for the learning of important skills that can be applied in romantic relationships including trust, problem solving, and intimacy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011), however, that was not what was found in the present study.

Interestingly, it was also found that avoidant attachment did not affect romantic intimacy which deviates from existing research (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bradford et al., 2002; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Guerrero, 1998). It has been previously found that individuals with an avoidant attachment exhibit less warmth, self-disclosure, and intimacy towards their romantic partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bradford et al., 2002; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Guerrero, 1998). It has also been found that individuals with an avoidant attachment have difficulty trusting others resulting in less commitment and emotional support from their romantic partners which negatively impacts the development of romantic intimacy (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Li & Chan, 2012; Marshall, 2010). The results from the current study may be partially explained by the sample used for this study. The NICHD data used for this study is a fairly low-risk population and the differences in attachment quality may not explain much in a low-risk sample. It is also important to note that attachment is not the only explanatory construct for romantic intimacy. In addition, the participants are also quite young at the time romantic relationships were measured and may have limited understandings of romantic relationships based upon the media versus their own experiences. The age of the participants is much younger than most research on romantic intimacy (Bae & Wickrama, 2018; Bradford et al., 2002; Collins & Read, 1990; Davila et al., 2017; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Lippert & Prager, 2001; Oriña et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2014).

The results of this current analysis did not find that peer relationships were a mediating factor in the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic intimacy. It was hypothesized that since the IWM has the potential to be influenced by experiences and relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008), adolescents with an avoidant attachment who also have positive friendships and experiences may begin to perceive others, including their friends and romantic partners as trustworthy and dependable, thus potentially altering the IWM. This is consistent with other longitudinal studies (Grossmann et al., 2005; Sroufe et al., 2005) that indicate that peer relationships are themselves a developmental outcome of earlier influences. For example, the Minnesota Longitudinal Study found that, “in middle childhood, those who were confident in themselves tended to form friendships with other confident and competent children. That meant that others were either left to associate with less competent children or were isolated” (Sroufe et al., 2005, p. 196). Associating with less competent children, or even fewer children to begin with, does not typically lead to the development of positive interpersonal relationships. Although this study did not find that positive peer relationships impacted romantic intimacy, it is still possible that such an effect could occur, albeit in an altered environment such as group counseling. It has been found that group counseling is an effective strategy to use with adolescents who have difficulty with social and relational skills (Sink et al., 2012). Not only does group counseling allow for group bonding and cohesion as the group focuses on each individual member, but it also helps the individuals create identity and increases their confidence, self-esteem, and social capabilities including empathy (Whitten & Burt, 2015).

Also, in contrast to previous research, the results of the current study found that SES and gender did not affect romantic intimacy. Collins et al., (1997) found that SES was shown to

influence relationship functioning, resulting in low quality and unstable romantic relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002). This finding suggests that low levels of SES result in an increased risk of an unstable romantic relationship therefore decreasing romantic intimacy (Bae & Wickrama, 2018; Bryant & Conger, 2002; Collins et al., 1997). Previous research has also found that girls tend to value intimacy and desire closeness in their relationships significantly more than boys and exhibit an increase in motivation to achieve their desired intimacy compared to boys (Feldman et al., 1998). Moreover, there are differences in gender antecedents of intimacy. Cooper and Grotevant (1987) found that for women, their romantic relationships were influenced by family tolerance for separateness. They found that for men, intimacy was correlated with family connectedness (Cooper & Grotevant, 1987), which suggests that family elements that reinforce conventional characteristics taught in families depending on gender could impact intimacy. Thus, for men who are socialized in a more traditional manner to be independent and emotionless, intimacy is supported by family cohesion. For women, intimacy is nurtured by a family environment that supports independence while permitting separateness. Children raised in a family environment consisting of warmth, control, cohesion, and independence tend to develop into adolescents with sufficient skills needed for an intimate relationship (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

The results of the current study also found that SES did not influence peer relationships. This finding was not consistent with prior research that has suggested that SES influences the quality of peer relationships. Research has shown that high SES results in high-quality relationships with peers (Li et al., 2020). Additionally, adolescents who come from low SES backgrounds reported lower quality relationships with their peers (Li et al., 2020). The current study found that SES affected individuals with avoidant attachment only, with adolescents from

higher SES backgrounds being less likely to exhibit avoidant attachment, suggesting that adolescents with low SES backgrounds are more likely to have an avoidant attachment. These findings are consistent with prior research that found that adolescents with low SES backgrounds displayed more insecure attachment (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996). Research also shows that adolescents with high SES backgrounds have better access to resources, nutrition, and maternal availability resulting in secure attachment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Research specifically addressing how low SES effects avoidant attachment has not been investigated, but it could be speculated that adolescents in low SES environments are more likely to exhibit an avoidant attachment due to the increased stress on the caregiver which may negatively impact the caregiver's ability to attend to, and respond sensitively, to their child's needs (Roubinov & Boyce, 2017). Low SES has also been found to be related to withdrawal and low levels of communication, (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Chen & Berdan, 2006), sensitivity, and warmth (Kalil & Ryan, 2020) in the caregiver.

The current study is not without a few limitations. One limitation is that the data gathered for romantic intimacy and peer relationships was self-reported data, so it is possible that the participants responded in a socially desirable way. Another limitation is that only adolescents with an avoidant attachment were included in the analysis, thus potentially limiting the variance available to explain a relationship between the variables of interest, and also limiting the ability to detect the impact of the construct of attachment. This sample was also not representative of ethnic backgrounds, with the majority of participants being within the ages of 12 to 15 and of Caucasian descent. The relatively low-risk of the participants in the NICHD data may also have limited the amount of explanatory variance available to measure relationships among the variables of interest. For example, avoidant attachment may not explain much

variance in the development of peer and romantic relationships in low-risk populations as the stress upon friendship development is limited. However, in high-risk samples with multiple stressors, avoidant attachment may exert a greater impact on relationship development.

Since avoidant attachment is characterized by individuals avoiding feelings and situations that could activate their attachment needs, these individuals may experience emotional loneliness and social isolation (Guerrero, 1998; Marshall, 2010; Simpson et al., 1992; Solomon, 2009). This may affect their mental health as well as relationships. It is not uncommon for adolescents with an avoidant attachment to develop depressive symptoms (Buhrmester, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals with avoidant attachment may benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy and social skills interventions designed to help them recognize attachment needs and how to engage in mutually reciprocal relationships. For example, for individuals with avoidant attachment, CBT may allow them to recognize their attachment needs by restoring the communication and trust in their caregivers resulting in open discussions about their experiences, needs, and expectations from the caregiver (Bosmans, 2016). Moreover, for individuals with an avoidant attachment, social skills interventions may enhance reciprocity in their relationships by teaching them the skills to communicate their needs and expectations from their relationships, how to be open and honest and self-disclose in their relationships, and how to provide support to others (Harrell et al., 2009). With early intervention, successful relationships are more likely to occur (Kilmann et al., 1999).

In the context of a therapeutic relationship, it is important for therapists to address and question the client's communication strategies that may be a function of their attachment experiences and mental representations of their caregivers (Muller, 2009) that are now being replicated with significant others. It is also important for the therapist to acknowledge and

express interest in the client's story telling discrepancies of their experiences with their caregiver and to draw connections between the client's symptoms and attachment related behaviors such as difficulty with emotional closeness and intimacy (Muller, 2009). Muller (2009) reported that these strategies could motivate the client to be more open and vulnerable in discussing relationships and possibly change their perceptions of others as being rejecting to accepting.

While trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy is not specifically designed for individuals with avoidant attachment, some of the strategies may be useful for individuals with avoidant attachment. Bistricky et al., (2017) states that Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is an evidence-based strategy that aims to decrease the automatic reactions and representations that avoidant attachment individuals hold. This is performed by encouraging the verbalization of their thoughts and feelings while experiencing acceptance and support from the group (Bistricky et al., 2017). These groups have been found to increase social competence behaviors such as decreased conflict and maintaining close relationships and trust with others (Cohen & Mannarino, 1998) which may benefit individuals with an avoidant attachment who have difficulty with self-disclosure, trusting others, and conflict resolution.

An additional intervention although not specifically for avoidant individuals is the Social Skills Group Intervention for Adolescents which is designed to improve social skills, social relationships, and emotional adjustment. This intervention could be helpful for individuals with avoidant attachment who have difficulty comfortably interacting and trusting their peers. Harrell et al., (2009) found that the adolescents in this intervention were found to improve their self-concept and social self-efficacy while decreasing their depressive and anxiety symptoms. The adolescents reported feeling better about themselves and felt an increase in self-confidence which research suggests positively impacts social relationships (Harrell et al., 2009). Once

adolescents experience acceptance on a regular basis, particularly for the expression of affective needs, their IWM may begin to change so that they begin to view themselves as worthy of care and others as being more trustworthy.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect avoidant attachment might have on peer relationships and whether positive peer relationships influenced romantic intimacy. A multiple regression analysis was used to examine the research questions. Consistent with a developmental theory of attachment, the results found that avoidant attachment influenced peer relationships. However, it was also found that peer relationships did not influence romantic intimacy, and that avoidant attachment did not affect romantic intimacy.

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