Experimental Proposal About Victims of Intimate Partner Violence,

Their Attachment Style and Readiness to Leave

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Abstract

This experimental proposal will examine the correlation between attachment style of female victims of intimate partner violence and their readiness to stay or leave the abusive relationship. Past research has indicated the influence of emotional attachment on the victims’ readiness to remain or leave an abusive relationship, but has not been able to identify which level of attachment is associated with the decision to stay or leave. The hypothesis for this proposal states that female victims of intimate partner violence who have high insecure/anxious attachment style have low levels of readiness to leave the relationship. Two instruments will be used to measure the variables; the Decision to Leave Scale, the researcher will be able to measure the client’s readiness level to leave the abusive relationship and The Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR)-Short Form which measures attachment levels in relationships. An average of 100 to 150 participants will be recruited from five different domestic violence organizations. Using a qualitative correlational design, with nonequivalent groups, the researcher is anticipating a strong correlation between high levels insecure/anxious attachment style and low levels of readiness to leave an abusive relationship. Significant clinical findings will contribute to provide empirically-based psychotherapeutic treatments, better resources and opportunities to female victims of intimate partner violence.

*Keywords:* IPV, attachment style, readiness, domestic violence, abusive relationships

Intimate Partner Violence, Attachment Style and Readiness to Leave

Intimate Partner Violence ( IPV) has been known to affect individuals, families and society in a pervasive manner (Tasso, Brown, Griffo, & Maxwell, 2012). Research indicate that 25% of women report being a victim of physical assault by their intimate partner (Tasso et al., 2012). It is estimated that 1.5 million women are victims of domestic violence acts each year, 1,500 of those acts are murders (Tasso et al., 2012). Previous investigations have studied the dynamics of intimate partner violence in an attempt to decrease the incidence of this problem. The primary concern for addressing this issue is the safety of those victims, because women who choose to leave the relationship are at greater risk or revictimization once they leave the relationship and return (Kuijpers, Van der Knaap, & Winkel, 2012).

Women struggle to consider the decision to stay or leave the abusive relationship because of the influence of positive and/or negative reinforcements resulting from events they face after they leave the relationship (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007). Victims of IPV face various challenges as they consider the decision to remain in the abusive relationship or leave to preserve their lives and the lives of their children. Some of these challenges are economic resources, fear of being revictimized by the abuser, concerns about support and community resources, and emotional attachment (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton 2007). Emotional attachment has been identified as an influencing factor in the decision to stay or leave the abusive relationship (Gezen & Oral, 2013).

**IPV and Mental Health**

IPV has a significant correlation with mental health where female victims report more psychopathology symptoms such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and personality disorders than females with no history of IPV (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010; Goldenson, Geffner, Foster, & Clipson, 2007). Research indicate that 64% of female victim of IPV report high rates of major depression and higher suicidal ideation as a result of physical violence against them (Karakoc, Gulsere, Tenekeci, & Mete 2014). One of the challenges of mental health providers is maintaining the safety of those victims and their children when they choose to continue to cohabitate with the perpetrator of the violence against them while treating their mental health conditions (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

Researchers have indicated that it is necessary to conduct further studies about the dynamics involving IPV in an effort to develop new models of treatment to predict risk factors that may result in future victimization (Gay, Harding, Jackson, Burns, & Baker, 2013). Considering the impact that IPV has on mental health, research findings indicate there is a greater need to develop psychological interventions to help victims (Craparo, Gori, Petruccelli, Cannella, & Simonelli, 2014). It is recommended to focus on developing the victim’s emotional abilities which will help them cope with the stress resulting form IPV and strengthen their sense of self so they are in a better position to choose safety (Craparo et al. 2014).

**IPV and Attachment**

Attachment anxiety has been identified as a predictor of violence, where females with attachment anxiety are victimized by the perpetrator in response to avoidant attachment (Weston, 2008). Attachment style has has also been identified as an influencing factor for women to return to the abuser after having left the abusive relationship (Griffing, Ragin, Sage, Madry, Bingham, & Primm, 2002). Research indicate that women’s attachment style influences their ability to manage violence at home or leave the relationship (Gezen & Oral, 2013). Adult attachment style is considered a significant predictor of relational adjustment; psychological aggression and victimization (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). Victims have the tendency to underestimate the role that their emotional attachment to the abuser plays (Griffing et al., 2002). They have difficulty realizing they are at greater risk of returning to the abusive relationship if in the past they have done so influenced by emotional attachment (Griffing et al., 2002).

**IPV and Readiness to Leave the Relationship**

Attachment is a significant influential factor in the victim’s decision to return or remain in an abusive relationship (Griffing, et al., 2002). Some women choose to remain in an abusive relationship even though they desire for the abuse to end (Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006). Although, they may have a clear knowledge and understanding of what they want in a loving relationship as well as what love is and is not (Smith, Nunley, & Martin, 2013); they find themselves unable to detach from the abusive relationship (Smith et al., 2013). The main difference between women who stay or leave is found in higher levels of satisfaction and positive feelings for the partner in the relationship rather than perceived relationship alternatives, investment or commitment (Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000). Women who struggle with the stay/leave decision making process are influenced by positive or negative reinforcements from the stimuli resulting from various events when they leave the relationship (Bell & Naugle, 2005).

**IPV and Resilience and Coping**

Factors that help the victims overcome the experience of domestic violence and prepare them to leave the relationship are: having access to strong advocacy services, knowledge about available services, obtaining restraining orders or legal residence status, and receiving medical services or examinations for sexual abuse (Zarza & Adler, 2008). It is important to provide them with education about the external factors that influence attitudes and behaviors of an abusive relationship to help them identify their own consistency that may lead to being, engaging or remaining trapped in a violent relationship (Dare, Guadagno, & Muscanell, 2013).

Abused women who face lack of adequate social resources to cope are capable of developing resilient responses after leaving an intimate partner violent relationship by using external and internal factors such as: housing, informal and formal social support (López-Fuentes & Calvete, 2015). As the coping process advances they are better prepared to develop personal internal resilience factors such as: physical activity, rediscovering oneself, altruism, control over one’s life, creativity, spirituality, focus on the present, sense of humor, introspection, optimism, and projects and goals (López-Fuentes & Calvete, 2015). Spiritually-based survival and resilience strategies, especially a relationship with God help abused women leave the abusive relationship and cope with trauma of an intimate partner violence because it moves them from coping for survival to developing a resilient healthier sense of self, self-efficacy, hope, and healing (Drumm, Popescu, Cooper, Trecartin, Seifert, Foster, & Kilcher, 2013).

**Literature Suggested Future Research**

The literature suggests recommendations for future research to address the influence and association of attachment style on the decision or readiness from a victim to stay or leave an abusive relationship (Griffing et al., 200). It would benefit the victim’s safety to provide empirical factors that eliminate their susceptibility to abuse and their decision to stay in an abusive environment (Dare, et al., 2013).

**Proposed Method**

Past research about intimate partner violence has focused mostly on the dynamics of violence and attachment issues between the victim and the perpetrator within the intimate partner violent relationship (Weston, 2008). The issue of attachment style as an influencing factor to determine readiness to leave the abusive relationship has not been considered. Suggestions for future research considered by Griffing et al. (2002) consider important to identify which attachment style may be associated with the decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship. This research will address the question about which attachment style influences the readiness to leave or remain in an intimate partner violence relationship by finding the correlation between insecure/anxious attachment style and readiness to leave an IPV relationship.

The primary purpose for this research is to investigate the relationship between attachment style and readiness to leave an intimate partner violence relationship. The research question for this study is, Does insecure/anxious attachment style influences the decision to stay or leave the abusive relationship? The research hypothesis is that female victims of intimate partner violence who have high insecure/anxious attachment style have low levels of readiness to leave the relationship. The null hypothesis is that female victims of intimate partner violence who have low insecure/anxious attachment style do not have high levels of readiness to leave the relationship.

The proposed research has the potential to provide information about how the attachment style influences and correlates to the victim’s decision to stay or leave the abusive relationship. The evidence resulting from this study has the potential to assist practitioners in developing evidence-based treatment protocols to help the victims choose safety. Findings from the suggested research also has the potential to contribute to offer information to the mental health field that may further assist victims by providing opportunities and the development of further treatments to strengthen their emotional attachment style by empowering them to prevent future violence.

**Participants**

Participants for this study will be recruited from five domestic violence organizations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area: SafeHaven of Tarrant County, Genesis Women’s Shelter and Support, New Beginning Center, Hope’s Door, and The Family Place. Participants are females and identified as victims of intimate partner relationship from a current or former abusive relationship and receiving active counseling services from these domestic violence organizations. They are between the ages of 19 to 60 from various ethnic groups including Hispanic, Anglo, and African American. It is estimated that an average of 20 to 30 participants may be recruited from each organization; making the average number of the sample size of 100 to 150. Each organization provides individual counseling, group counseling, children’ s counseling for the mothers who receive services, advocacy, case workers, and shelter free of charge.

Participants will be selected from the counseling groups and those who receive individual counseling. The counselors providing individual and group counseling will offer clients to participate voluntarily in the study with the incentive to receive a $20 voucher to buy clothes at the agencies’ thrift store. These organizations also provide pro bono legal services. Participants who need legal services are offered to have legal services fees waived as an incentive for participating in the research. Participants who accepted to participate in the research after the verbal invitation with the counselor were provided with a written invitation that explained the description of the research, its purpose, benefits, risk, and contributions. The nature of any potential participation is voluntary and anonymous.

**Design**

The design selected for this research is a qualitative, descriptive, quasi-experimental study with nonequivalent groups to find the correlation between the participant’s level of attachment style in association to their level of readiness to leave or remain in an intimate partner violent relationship. A descriptive study is chosen for this research because it is considered high in external validity due the variables are not manipulated (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 71). Nonequivalent groups design is being used in this case because both groups are different in terms of current status in the IPV relationship, one group remains in the abusive relationship while the second group is no longer in an abusive relationship (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 181). Participants will be assigned to each group prior to the beginning of the research and comparisons between groups will be made (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 181).

A correlational study will be conducted with a population of female victims of domestic violence whether in a current IPV relationship or a former IPV were the sample is currently receiving counseling services at a domestic violence organization. A correlation of association will examine insecure/anxious attachment style as the predictive variable for readiness to leave an abusive relationship as the outcome variable.

**Procedure**

The researcher will obtain authorization from the director of the clinical services in the organization to conduct the research. The organization will benefit from the findings of the research by having empirically based information that will help them develop evidence-based strategies to improve the resources and services provided to their clients. Each participating organization will assign a counselor to be the site coordinator.

The site coordinator will receive a *study package* provided and delivered by the researcher. The study package includes the 30 surveys and questionnaires to be completed. A sealed collection box will be provided for the participants to deposit the surveys/questionnaires once they are completed. Participants will be assigned to two different groups; one group will be formed with participants who have already left the abusive relationship. The second group will be formed with participants who remain in the abusive relationship. Participants will complete the surveys as they come for counseling services.

After 30 days, the site counselor will summon participants who have not come for services and completed the surveys/questionnaires by requesting them to come during an appointed date to complete such surveys/questionnaires. Once all surveys are completed, the site coordinator will notify the researcher. The researcher will be collecting the *study package* personally.

**Measures**:

The predictive variable of attachment style will be measured using The Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR)-Short Form (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). The ECR-Short Form is a 12 item scale that measures attachment style in relationships (Wei et al., 2007); (refer to Appendix B for a sample of the ECR). The outcome variable of readiness to leave an abusive relationship will be measured using Decision to Leave Scale (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003). The Decision To Leave Scale (DLS), is an instrument developed to help women in abusive relationships identify reasons, obstacles, or challenges perceived by them as determinant factors to leave or stay in that relationship (Hendy et al., 2003). Both groups will be measure in terms of attachment and readiness level to leave the abusive relationship or that contributed to leave the relationship in the past. The internal validity threat of testing is not foreseeable in this study due to the participants are not taking a pre-test/post-test (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 96).

**Statistical procedure.**  Once data is collected it will be analyzed using SPSS version 22.0, using Pearson correlation coefficient to describe the relationship between the two variables (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 244). The correlation coefficient will provide information about the degree of the relationships between the two variables being measured (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 244).

**Validity**

**Internal validity**

In studying the population of female victims of IPV, various threats to internal validity have been considered in the development of this research. The history effect has been considered in light of two risks; one of the risks is that female victims who are in the group who have remained in the abusive relationship may choose to leave the relationship during the course of the study. The second risk is that females in the group who have already left the abusive relationship may choose to return to the abusive relationship.

The threat of attrition is important in a study to ensure that both groups will be equally measured (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 95). Considering the nature of the population being victims of intimate partner violence, a threat of attrition is present for various reasons. One risk is the mortality of those clients who are currently in the abusive relationship, the second reason is dropout (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 95). The internal validity of maturation, regression, and testing are not anticipated to affect the study due to the groups not having a pretest/posttest measure (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 94).

**Statistical Validity**

To avoid unreliability of treatment implementation, all participants will receive the same counseling services (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 89). The researcher is hypothesizing that there is a true relationship between the variables to prevent low statistical power (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 87). The “Fishing” and Error-Rate Problems statistical conclusion validity is not anticipated to occur in this study due to the proposed research has a specific hypothesis stated (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 88).

Considering that all participants are receiving the same counseling services at the moment the study, no unreliability of treatment implementation threat is foreseen (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 89). The sample of the study is homogeneous due to all participants being female victims of IPV (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 89). The researcher will attempt to minimize the inaccurate effect size estimation by recruiting a large sample of approximately 100 to 150 participants (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan 2008, p. 90).

**Results**

The researcher anticipates to reject the null hypothesis that states that female victims of intimate partner violence who have low insecure/anxious attachment style do not have high levels of readiness to leave the relationship in favor the alternative hypothesis stating that female victims of intimate partner violence who have high insecure/anxious attachment style, have low levels of readiness to leave the relationship. If the findings reject the null hypothesis when the null hypothesis is true, then the researcher may have made a type II error decision (Jackson 2012, p. 183-185). The researcher is predicting that the outcome finds significant support of a strong correlation between high levels of insecure/anxiety attachment style being a strong predictor of low levels of readiness to leave an IPV relationship.

**Discussion**

The strength of this study is the sample size and its homogeneity by all participants being exposed to current or former IPV. A limitation of this study is that is conducted only in the urban area of Dallas/Fort Worth and not rural areas. It would be important to replicate the study in a rural area and determine if the findings of the study change based on geographical issues, socio-economic status, and education. An additional issue to consider is to evaluate if the sample can be generalized to other cultures such as native Indians, Asians, or from the middle east.

There are no current ethical concerns that may present a risk to the study. Anticipating that the outcome of the study is clinically significant, results will provide practitioners with information that will help them develop relevant and empirically based treatment plans to address insecure/anxiety attachment issues. This will help clinicians to strengthen the victims emotional attachment style and sense of self by empowering them to prevent future violence. Findings will offer information to the domestic violence organizations and the mental health field that may serve to further assist victims by providing additional opportunities to cope with their lives free from intimate partner violence.

**Suggestion for Future Research**

Future research should investigate if readiness to leave an IPV relationship will be affected after victims participate in a psychotherapeutic treatment focused on strengthening their sense of self and attachment style. Using a pretest/posttest measure, the researcher may be able to provide information about the influence of specific treatments on the decision to stay or leave an IPV relationship and therefore contribute to eradicate the problem of intimate partner violence.

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**Appendix A**

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| Table 1 |  |  |
| *Addressing the Validity of the Proposed Measure* | |  |
| Type of Validity | Definition | Application to Proposed Measure |
| Construct Validity | How well the independent and dependent variables represent the constructs they were intended to measure. | This study represents them well because the sample is drawn from a population of female victims of IPV who have been identified as such and receiving services from a domestic violence agency. |
| Content Validity | The extent to which a measuring instrument covers a representative sample of the domain of behaviors to be measured | The combination of both instruments represent the facets of the sample and the behaviors being measured. |
| Criterion Validity | The extent to which a measuring instrument accurately predicts behavior or ability in a given area | Both chosen instruments have high validity to measure the behavior |
| Concurrent Validity | Measures the ability of the test to estimate present performance | Both chosen instruments have high validity and reliability at measuring present performance in this study. |
| Predictive Validity | Measures the ability of the test to predict future performance | The measure DLS will measure if participants in the group who remains in an abusive relationship is likely to leave the relationship or not. |
| Face Validity | The extent to which a measuring instruments appears valid on its surface | Both instruments appear valid with empirical evidence supporting their validity and reliability |
| Convergent Validity | When a measures of construct in fact is able measure that construct | The ECR-short form is proposed due to convergent validity at measuring attachment levels in relationships |
| Discriminant Validity | When the correlation of of measures of different constructs Should be smaller than correlations of measures of the same construct. | This form of validity is not anticipated in this study. |

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| Table 2 |  |  |
| *Addressing Threats to Internal Validity* | |  |
| Type of Threat | Definition | How it will be Addressed |
| History | An event that transpires during the time when the treatment is administered and may affect observations | Two groups are formed for this study with equal counseling opportunities and services. However, the likelihood of an event out of the researcher’s control may happen is always possible. |
| Maturation | Normal developmental changes in participants between pretest and posttest that might affect the results. | The proposed study is not utilizing pretest/posttest. |
| Testing | Changes in scores due to taking the test more than once | It is not foreseeable that the the participants may take the test more than once due to the nature of the study does not include a pre-test/post test. |
| Regression | Changes in scores due to the participants who score low on the pretest will score higher on the posttest | This study is not utilizing pretest/posttest. |
| Selection Bias | Differences between groups that exist before implementation of the treatment. | This study has formed two groups within the same sample population to determine correlation between variables. |
| Contamination | occurs when information about the experiment is communicated between groups of participants, which may lead to resentment, rivalry, or diffusion of treatment | Contamination is a threat if both groups communicate to each other about their experience responding to measures due to the possible influence of leaving or remaining in the abusive relationship. This threat will be prevented by individually administering the tests to participants and providing instructions about not sharing information with other participants during the course of the study. |
| Attrition | The effect of participants dropping out of a study |  |
| Instrumentation | Changes in the measuring device or procedure over the course of the study | There is no utilization of pretest/post test. The researcher will be the one coding and managing data to avoid instrumentation threat of validity. |
| Combination of Selection and Other Threats | Threats of validity across the selection of groups for one group but not the other group | This threat is not foreseeable in this research |
| Diffusion or Imitation of Treatment |  |  |
| Special Treatment or Reaction |  |  |

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| Table 3 |  |  | |
| *Addressing the Threats to Statistical Conclusion Validity* | | |  | |
| Type of Threat | Definition | Application to Proposed Measure | |
| Low Statistical Power | The conclusion that no relationship exists when in fact a true relationship exists | The researcher is hypothesizing that there is a true relationship between the variables | |
| Violated Assumptions of Statistical Tests | When assumptions are violated, the researcher may be misled about the probabilities of making Type I and Type II errors | The researcher will rely on the results from the measures to interpret the data. Assumptions are not intended to be violated. | |
| “Fishing” and Error-Rate Problems | Conducting many statistical tests on a data set without stating specific hypotheses | This threat has been prevented by establishing a specific hypothesis for this research | |
| Unreliability of Measures | Introduce error variance and obscure the true state of affairs, such measures cannot be expected to be related to other measures | This threat has been prevented by choosing instruments with high validity and reliability. | |
| Restriction of Range | Occurs when an instrument designed to measure one variable Is not sensitive to the construct being measured at upper limit or at lower limit. When an instrument designed to measure pathology is used on a non clinic population. | The measures chosen have been selected for being sensitive to measure the construct at the upper limit an lower limit. | |
| Unreliability of Treatment Implementation | Variations in delivery of treatments may lead to variability in responding, increasing the error of variance | All participants will receive the same treatment and counseling services. | |
| Extraneous Variance in the Experimental Setting | Any aspect of the experimental setting that leads to variability in responding will increase the error variance | This study is expecting to not have this threat, however, there is a risk of occurring if environmental, history or maturation occurs which may affect the extraneous variance. | |
| Heterogeneity of Units | Differences in experimental units can lead to variability in responding | The sample of the study is homogeneous by all being female victims of IPV | |
| Inaccurate Effect Size Estimation | When effects detected in the study is inaccurately estimated | This is a possible threat that has been attempted to minimize by recruiting a large sample | |

Appendix B

**Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-S)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Neutral | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

**Instruction**: The following statements concern how you feel in romantic relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship. Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it. Mark your answer using the following rating scale:

1. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.

2. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.

3. I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.

4. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.

5. I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.

6. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.

7. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.

8. I do not often worry about being abandoned.

9. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.

10. I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.

11. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.

12. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.

Scoring Information: Anxiety = 2, 4, 6, 8 (reverse), 10, 12 Avoidance = 1 (reverse), 3, 5 (reverse), 7, 9 (reverse), 11

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