

“Belonging to my family, but still being myself”: The relationships between dimensions of attachment theory and personal authority in the family system

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This study investigated the associations between (a) the adult attachment in close relationships measured by attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety (Experiences of Close Relationships Inventory; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), and (b) the intergenerational family patterns in terms of personal authority constructs (individuation, triangulation, intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational intimidation; Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire, PAFS-Q; Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984a, 1984b). The study also examined gender differences in PAFS-Q dimensions using the data from 160 adult couples ($N = 320$). Our results showed that higher levels on Spousal Intimacy, Spousal Fusion/Individuation, Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation, and Personal Authority significantly predicted lower anxiety, while higher levels on Spousal Intimacy, and less Triangulation with spouses and children significantly predicted lower avoidance in close relationships. Gender differences were found only on Personal Authority scale, with men reporting greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females.

Key words: adult attachment, differentiation of self, personal authority in the family system, intergenerational relationships

Although family of origin theories (Bowen, 1978; Williamson, 1991) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) are using apparently different concepts, both of them highlight the impact of unresolved family emotional patterns on individual's close relationships across the lifespan. Bowlby defined attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (1969, p. 194). Williamson's personal authority in the family system (PAFS) theory's main question was “How does one leave home emotionally while somehow still remains lovingly connect-

ed within the family of origin?” (1991, p. 3). This study was designed to assess the relationships between the attachment theory as presented by Bowlby and Williamson's intergenerational family therapy theory. Our main aim was to examine how intergenerational family systems concepts in terms of personal authority constructs relate to adult attachment dimensions in intimate relationships (anxiety and avoidance). In order to get a better understanding of Williamson's PAFS theory, Bowen's (1978) family of origin theory will also be discussed.

Adult attachment theory

Hazan and Shaver (1987) were the first researchers who provided arguments for the explanation why romantic love could be viewed as an attachment process, followed by other empirical studies (e.g., Stanojevic, 2004). They divide adults into three attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Furthermore, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four-category typology of attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing). Other researchers (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998) have proposed that attachment should be conceptualized in two-dimensional terms (anxiety and avoidance). The anxiety dimension is described as the degree

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to which an individual is worried about being unloved, rejected, or abandoned. The avoidance dimension shows the degree to which a person avoids intimacy in relationships with significant others. Individuals with secure attachment styles are low in both anxiety and avoidance, and they feel comfortable with intimacy and their relationships with others are based on confidence. In contrast, the insecure attachment styles (preoccupied, dismissing, or fearful) are characterized by high levels of avoidance, anxiety, or both. Both the attachment styles and the attachment dimensions conceptualizations are used in the adult attachment studies today (Hollist & Miller, 2005; Skowron & Dendy, 2004). Research on adult attachment theory indicates that early infant-caregiver emotional relationships are reflected later in the adult intimate relationships. Early relationships patterns can be re-created due to working models, that is, mental representations, such as representations of the "self" and "others" (Bowlby, 1969). The self-representation model reflects the closeness-related anxiety, and the others-representation model reflects the avoidance of intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Studies also found that the attachment styles tend to remain relatively stable from infancy through adulthood (Bowlby, 1980; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Fraley, 2002). However, more recently researchers have recognized that early childhood emotional experiences may become updated and modified by new experiences (McConnell & Moss, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004). Bowlby (1978) suggests that there is a delicate balance between the infant's attempts of seeking proximity to the caregiver and the exploration of his environment particularly between connectedness and autonomy, which is established probably for life. This assumption is underlined also by the intergenerational family system theories (Bowen, 1978; Williamson, 1991).

The transgenerational model of family functioning

Bowen's family of origin theory focuses on how experiences in the family of origin affect individual and family functioning in the subsequent generations (Bowen, 1978). The differentiation of self is a central concept in his theory and refers to the extent to which an individual has successfully resolved emotional attachments to his/her family of origin (Klever, 2004; Murdock & Gore, 2004). Individuals who are highly differentiated tend to function better in relationships, as they are capable of separating their emotions from their rational thoughts. Individuals who are poorly differentiated have no clear sense of self (Timm & Keiley, 2011). Their emotions, as well as a strong need for approval and acceptance, tend to drive their behaviors and relationships. In poorly differentiated families family members' individuality is viewed as disloyal and threatening to the family's stability (Skowron, & Dendy, 2004; Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009). These individuals tend to use dysfunctional strategies for managing conflict, such as tri-

angulation. Triangulation occurs when tension or conflict builds to an intolerable level within a two-person relationship. The person most uncomfortable with the relationship brings a third person into the relationship (by complaining to him/her), which relieves some of the pressure (Buehler, Franck, & Cook, 2009; Fosco, & Grych, 2010). According to Bowen (1978), levels of differentiation and unresolved emotional attachments get re-enacted in the future relationships and the future generations of a family. At this point the question is how does one achieve the self-differentiation and yet stay connected to the family. According to Williamson (1991), the ultimate goal should not be simply to achieve a differentiated self, but to achieve a differentiated position within the context of a warm intimate relationships with the family of origin. Personal authority is therefore defined as a synthesis between these two competing ideas of differentiation and intimacy.

PAFS theory

Based on the intergenerational family theory, Williamson (1991) introduced a new specific family developmental stage, considered an individual and family life cycle stage and defined as PAFS (Williamson, 1981a, 1981b). The realization of personal authority occurs during middle adulthood, that is, between the ages of 30-45 (Williamson, 1981a). The central developmental task of this stage is to renegotiate and terminate the hierarchical power boundary between parents and their adult offspring, and thus to gain psychosocial peerhood (Bray, 2004). This hierarchical power boundary was preserved earlier by intergenerational intimidation, which is considered the opposite pole of personal authority (Williamson, 1991). Furthermore, the intergenerational intimidation is reflected in a lack of individuation and intimacy, and is also associated with the irrational fears in adults that disagreeing with parents could result in personal harm (Bray, 2004). Williamson's PAFS construct, although similar to Bowen's concept of differentiation, has several aspects that are considered different. First, Williamson believed in the possibility of significant change in one's level of differentiation, which he named individuation, in a relatively short time (6-12 months of therapy) compared with Bowen who described differentiation as a lifelong process (Williamson, 1991). Second, PAFS reflects the relationship with parents (intergenerational), as opposed to the cumulative effect of the emotional transmission process over several generations (transgenerational). Finally, although PAFS focuses on the individual's ability to function autonomously, it also reflects the simultaneous voluntary intimate connection with the family members, especially parents. Although Bowen's work discusses the importance of both togetherness (intimacy) and autonomy, he tended to emphasize more the importance of individuality (Knudson-Martin, 1994), whereas Williamson's (1991) theory highlights more the equal necessity of both individuation and intimacy. Bowen

suggested that even if individuality and togetherness work interactively, it is healthier to lean toward the individuality as too much togetherness could create tension and aggressiveness. Contrarily, Williamson believed that emphasizing the autonomy or the intimacy would result in incomplete development, thus his work highlighted the equal importance of both autonomy (individuation) and intimacy.

Gender differences in PAFS constructs

According to Bowen (1978), no gender differences exist with regard to differentiation. Williamson (1991) stated that due to their different socialization, the tasks of differentiating from and connecting with parents and significant others are not the same for women and men. For women the most difficult task is to maintain their individuality in relationship with their partner, while for men the challenge is to deal with the issues of dependency and later interdependency with parents and significant others, especially in their relationship with their mother. However, the research results regarding gender differences are contradictory. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and Peleg (2008) found gender differences, but Jankowski and Hooper (2012) found no gender differences regarding components of differentiation. Previous research by Bray and Harvey (1992) employing the Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS-Q) with a sample of undergraduate students, found that females reported greater intergenerational intimacy, peer intimacy, and intimacy with individuation with parents than did males. In a similar study with college students, Garbarino, Gaa, Swank, McPherson, and Gratch (1995) found that males reported greater individuation within intergenerational family relationships than did females. Lawson and Brossart (2004) found that females experienced significantly less fusion and more individuation in relationships with their spouses/partners than did males. Furthermore, females reported significantly more intimacy with their mothers than did males and significantly less triangulation with their mothers than did males. In contrast, males reported a greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females.

The present study

To summarize, both Williamson's PAFS construct and Bowen's theory regarding differentiation of self focus on relationships with the family of origin, while attachment theory provides a framework for understanding infant-caregiver and adult intimate relationships. Although similar in many respects, PAFS possesses several major characteristics that distinguish it from Bowen's concept of differentiation. Several researchers provided support for the relationships between attachment dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) and Bowen's differentiation of self-construct (Burri, Schweitzer,

& O'Brien, 2014; Skowron & Dendy, 2004; Thorberg & Lyvers, 2006; Timm & Keiley, 2011). However, just a few studies (Ng & Smith, 2006) focused on the associations between attachment related avoidance and anxiety and intergenerational family issues in terms of personal authority constructs (individuation, triangulation, intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational intimidation). The sample used by Ng and Smith (2006) was an American sample, and to the best of our knowledge, there is no research investigating the above associations in a European sample. We believe that the associations between attachment related avoidance and anxiety and intergenerational family issues in terms of personal authority constructs should be investigated in an European sample as well due to the differences between the two cultures: (a) the American culture emphasizes more the values of independence, while failing to recognize the role of interconnection observed in European cultures; and (b) the differentiation of self is likely dependent on the cultural context. Based on the literature regarding PAFS, another important variable that did not receive enough attention thus far is gender. Bowen (1978) stated that no gender differences exist regarding differentiation, while Williamson (1991) emphasized the importance of gender differences in PAFS constructs. Some studies (Peleg, 2008; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) based on Bowen's differentiation of self, found gender differences, but others (Jankowski & Hooper, 2012) did not find gender differences regarding components of differentiation. Results employing PAFS-Q (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1995; Lawson & Brossart, 2004) found some small gender differences, showing that males reported greater individuation within intergenerational family relationships and greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females. However, in other studies (Bray & Harvey, 1992; Lawson & Brossart, 2004) females reported slightly healthier intergenerational relationships with parents, such as less fusion and more individuation in relationships with their spouses/partners, more intimacy with their mothers, and less triangulation with their mothers, than did males. Therefore, research results regarding gender differences on PAFS-Q are contradictory and need to be clarified. The goal of the research presented here is to (a) examine in more details the relationships between adult attachment avoidance and anxiety in intimate relationships and intergenerational personal authority constructs, and (b) assess gender differences in personal authority constructs (individuation, triangulation, intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational intimidation). According to research on intergenerational family relationships, the family patterns tend to be reproduced from generation to generation (Bowen, 1978). These patterns are transmitted through social learning in family (from parents and grandparents; Williamson & Bray, 1988) and are maintained due to loyalty to the previous generations (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 2001). Thus, the level of personal authority, intimacy, and individuation in fam-

ily relationships is reproduced in relationships with spouses and significant others. Similarly, early attachment patterns can be re-created in adult relationships (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006) due to two types of internal working models - representation of self which reflects anxiety about closeness and representation of the other which reflects avoidance of intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Tamaki & Takahashi, 2013). Based on these assumptions, healthier intergenerational patterns (greater personal authority, more intimacy, more individuation, and less triangulation and intergenerational intimidation) with family of origin and partners should be associated with secure attachment patterns (low avoidance, low anxiety) in close relationships. Thus, we hypothesize that avoidance and anxiety will be negatively associated with PAFS constructs. That is, less avoidance in close relationships should be associated with more individuation, more intimacy, greater personal authority, less triangulation, and less intergenerational intimidation in relationships with parents and significant others. Based on previous research (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1995; Lawson & Brossart, 2004) we anticipated some gender differences on PAFS, especially regarding individuation, fusion, intimacy, and personal authority. According to Williamson (1991), men should become adults who are more differentiated and who are less concerned about separating from parents as adults. Women are expected to become adults who are more concerned about the relationship with the mother and have more difficulties with differentiation. Based on these assumptions we expect men to report greater individuation and greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner (personal authority) and with less fusion than females. Furthermore, we expect women to report greater intimacy and more fusion in their relationships with their parents and significant others.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was done on a convenience sample of 160 married couples ($N = 320$) living in Debrecen, recruited by the students of undergraduate and graduate studies of University of Debrecen, including their relatives or available friends and acquaintances. Age range of participants was between 25 and 57, with a mean age of 37.73 ($SD = 6.67$). The youngest woman was 25 years, the oldest one was 54 years with an average age of 36 years ($SD = 6.42$); the youngest man was 25 years, the oldest one was 57 years, with an average age of 38 years ($SD = 6.42$). The average duration of their married state was 13 years ($SD = 7.30$), the shortest being 2 years, the longest one 33 years. Of the participants' parents, 83.4% were married, 3% lived in registered cohabitation, 2.5% lived in unregistered cohabitation, and the rest did not answer the question. In all, 6.3%

of the participants' parents were divorced and for 24.4% of the participants one of the parents died. Of the participants, 36.3% had a single child, 48.8% had two children, 12.5% had three children, 1.3% had four children, and 0.6% had five children. Regarding their education, 35.3% of the participants had a university or a college degree, 28.7% were vocational or industrial school graduates, 24.7% had high school diploma, 9.4% had higher vocational education, and 1.9% finished primary school or less.

Procedure

Participants were contacted by a formal letter and asked to take part in a research project that focused on adults' interpersonal relationships and their relationships with their families of origin. Questionnaire packets consisted of a demographic sheet, Experiences of Close Relationships Inventory, and PAFS-Q. Each packet included a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and explaining the voluntary and anonymous nature of the research.

Instruments

Experiences of Close Relationships Inventory (ECR; Brennan et al, 1998; Hungarian version ECR; Nagy, 2005) was designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety (i.e., the extent to which people are insecure or secure about their partner's availability and responsiveness to fulfil their needs of intimacy) and attachment-related avoidance (i.e., the extent to which people are uncomfortable being close to others as opposed to being secure by depending on others). The instrument consists of two subscales, Avoidance (discomfort with closeness and discomfort with depending on others) and Anxiety (fear of rejection and abandonment). The Hungarian short version of ECR consists of 36 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). The even items comprise the attachment-related anxiety scale, while the uneven items comprise the attachment-related avoidance scale. To obtain a score for attachment-related anxiety, all even items need to be averaged (with Item 22 reverse keyed). To obtain a score for attachment-related avoidance, all uneven items need to be averaged (with Items 1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23 reverse keyed). Statistical analysis for ECR variables was done by Dr. László Nagy. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate internal consistency reliabilities for the two ECR dimensions. In this study the internal consistency alpha levels were .77 for avoidance and .87 for anxiety. In Nagy's (2005) study the alpha for the avoidance was .88 and for the anxiety .87, the same as in our study, while Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that alpha for the avoidance was .94 and .91 for the anxiety.

The Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS-Q; Bray et al., 1984a; Hungarian version:

Nistor, Papp, Martos, & Molnár, 2013) is a self-report instrument created to measure significant relationships in three-generational family system, as interpreted by each person in a family (Bray et al., 1984a). Currently three versions of PAFS-Q exist: Version A for adults with children and Version B for adults without children, both developed by Williamson, Bray, and Malone; and Version C for young adults without children (Bray & Harvey, 1992). Version A of PAFS-Q was used in our study. The PAFS-Q consists of 132 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Only participants with children answered questions 125 to 132. The final version of PAFS-Q (Version A) consisted of eight scales: (a) Spousal Fusion/Individuation, the degree to which an individual operates in an emotionally fused or individuated manner in relationship with a mate or significant other; (b) Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation, the degree to which a person operates in an emotionally fused or individuated manner with the parents; (c) Spousal Intimacy, the degree of intimacy and satisfaction with an individual's spouse or significant other; (d) Intergenerational Intimacy, the degree of intimacy and satisfaction with parents (answered separately for mother and father); (e) Nuclear Family Triangulation, the triangulation between spouses and their children (completed only by people who had children); (f) Intergenerational Triangulation, the triangulation between a person and their parents; (g) Intergenerational Intimidation, the degree of personal intimidation experienced by individuals in relation to their parents; and (h) Personal Authority, the interactional aspect of personal authority as defined by Williamson (1981), including topics of conversation that require an intimate interaction with a parent while maintaining an individuated position. Items are scaled so that larger scores on Spousal Fusion/Individuation, Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation, Spousal Intimacy, and Intergenerational Intimacy indicate more individuation and intimacy. For Nuclear Family Triangulation, Intergenerational Triangulation, and Intergenerational Intimidation larger scores indicate less triangulation and less intimidation. For Personal Authority larger scores indicate greater personal authority. Internal consistency was reported by Bray et al. (1984b). The alpha coefficients of the scales ranged from .82 to .95 with a mean of .90 and from .80 to .95 with a mean of .89, at two separate data collection times. In our study the alpha ranged from .51 to .96. All reliability estimates were within the acceptable range, except for the Spousal Fusion/Individuation scale, which was .51, and for the Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation scale, which was .63. Ng and Smith (2006) also found that the alpha coefficient for Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation was lower (.55) than expected.

RESULTS

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between attachment dimensions and personal

authority constructs. First, we wanted to determine whether the members of the same couple are dependent or independent from each other. According to Mustanski, Starks, and Newcomb (2014), the most common method for this is intraclass correlation, and if the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is less than 0.45, then the observations may be treated as independent. The ICCs (one-way model, type:consistency) varied between 0.09 and 0.31, and we decided to handle them as independent in the following analyses. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of all the variables in the study were calculated (Table 1).

Correlational analysis (Pearson's r) shows some significant correlations between attachment dimensions and PAFS-Q constructs (Table 2). Avoidance was negatively correlated with Spousal Intimacy, Nuclear Family Triangulation, Intergenerational Intimacy, and Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; and positively correlated with Intergenerational Triangulation and Personal Authority. That is, those who experienced (a) greater individuation with their significant others or parents, (b) less triangulation with their spouses and children, and (c) higher degrees of intimacy with their spouses and parents tended to be less avoidant. Those who experienced (a) less triangulation with their significant others or parents and (b) greater personal authority (i.e., intimate interaction with their parents while maintaining an individuated stance) with their significant others or parents tended to be more avoidant in their intimate relationships.

Anxiety was negatively correlated with Spousal Intimacy, Spousal Fusion/Individuation, Nuclear Family Triangulation, Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation, Intergenerational intimacy, and Intergenerational Intimidation;

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of attachment dimensions and personal authority constructs

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Anxiety	3.56	1.00
Avoidance	2.48	0.88
SPINT	46.86	6.09
SPFUS	59.25	7.14
NFT	37.65	6.11
INTINT	95.43	17.63
INFUS	27.52	5.04
INTTRI	25.61	7.80
INTIM	101.50	17.02
PERAUT	37.92	5.49

Note. SPINT = Spousal Intimacy; SPFUS = Spousal Fusion/Individuation; NFT = Nuclear Family Triangulation; INTINT = Intergenerational Intimacy; INFUS = Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; INTTRI = Intergenerational Triangulation; INTIM = Intergenerational Intimidation; PERAUT = Personal Authority.

Table 2
Intercorrelations of attachment dimensions and personal authority constructs

	Anxiety	Avoidance	SPINT	SPFUS	NFT	INTINT	INFUS	INTTRI	INTIM
Avoidance	.342***	—							
SPINT	-.229***	-.515***	—						
SPFUS	-.260***	-.022	-.108	—					
NFT	-.251***	-.367***	.218***	.115*	—				
INTINT	-.129*	-.285***	.308***	-.060	.050	—			
INFUS	-.348***	-.293***	.140*	.249***	.360***	.438***	—		
INTTRI	.147**	.339***	-.193***	.034	.239***	-.282***	-.195***	—	
INTIM	-.110*	-.066	.036	.219***	.236***	-.323***	.149**	.016	—
PERAUT	-.019	.228***	-.138*	.049	-.293***	-.116*	-.155**	.210***	-.049

Note. SPINT = Spousal Intimacy; SPFUS = Spousal Fusion/Individuation; NFT = Nuclear Family Triangulation; INTINT = Intergenerational Intimacy; INFUS = Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; INTTRI = Intergenerational Triangulation; INTIM = Intergenerational Intimidation; PERAUT = Personal Authority.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

and positively correlated with Intergenerational Triangulation. That is, those who experienced (a) higher degrees of intimacy with their spouses, (b) greater individuation with their spouses and their significant others or parents, (c) less triangulation with their spouses and children, (d) less intergenerational intimidation, and (e) greater intimacy and satisfaction with their significant others or parents tended to be less anxious. Those who experienced less triangulation with their significant others or parents tended to be more anxious in their relationships.

Multivariate analysis

Similar to Ng and Smith (2006) we performed two multiple regression analyses with avoidance and anxiety as criterion variables and the eight PAFS-Q scales as predictor

variables. All variables were entered into the regressions simultaneously (Table 3).

Regression results on anxiety showed from the eight PAFS-Q factors four predicted participants' anxiety in romantic relationships: Spousal intimacy, Spousal Fusion/Individuation, Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation, and Personal Authority, $R^2 = .224$, adjusted $R^2 = .204$, $F(8, 317) = 11.17$, $p < .001$. That is, individuals experiencing higher degrees of intimacy and satisfaction with their spouses, greater individuation with their spouses and their significant others or parents, as well as greater personal authority tended to be less anxious.

Regression results on avoidance showed that from the eight PAFS-Q factors three predicted participants avoidance in romantic relationships: Spousal Intimacy, Nuclear Family Triangulation, Intergenerational Triangulation, $R^2 =$

Table 3
Multiple regression analysis predicting avoidance and anxiety from personal authority constructs

Variables	Anxiety					Avoidance				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
SPINT	-.035	.009	-.212	-3.846	< .001	-.058	.007	-.404	-8.282	< .001
SPFUS	-.028	.008	-.199	-3.712	< .001	-.005	.006	-.037	-.768	.443
NFT	-.018	.010	-.111	-1.894	.059	-.025	.008	-.176	-3.376	< .001
INTINT	.003	.004	.057	.854	.394	-.003	.003	-.058	-.978	.329
INFUS	-.052	.013	-.262	-4.044	< .001	-.016	.010	-.093	-1.609	.109
INTTRI	.010	.007	.079	1.448	.149	.019	.005	.173	3.585	< .001
INTIM	.001	.003	.020	.339	.735	< -.001	.003	-.009	-.184	.854
PERAUT	-.022	.010	-.120	-2.248	.025	.010	.008	.064	1.346	.179

Note. SPINT = Spousal Intimacy; SPFUS = Spousal Fusion/Individuation; NFT = Nuclear Family Triangulation; INTINT = Intergenerational Intimacy; INFUS = Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; INTTRI = Intergenerational Triangulation; INTIM = Intergenerational Intimidation; PERAUT = Personal Authority.

Table 4

Independent-samples t-test for gender differences in personal authority constructs

Variables	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
SPINT	Males	46.72	5.879	-0.403	318.0	.687
	Females	46.99	6.321			
SPFUS	Males	59.20	7.273	-0.117	318.0	.907
	Females	59.29	7.040			
NFT	Males	37.21	6.458	-1.276	316.0	.203
	Females	38.09	5.738			
INTINT	Males	93.90	17.057	-1.560	318.0	.120
	Females	96.97	18.107			
INFUS	Males	27.40	4.799	-0.421	318.0	.674
	Females	27.64	5.291			
INTTRI	Males	26.46	7.121	1.956	318.0	.051
	Females	24.76	8.373			
INTIM	Males	102.26	16.822	0.837	318.0	.403
	Females	100.66	17.227			
PERAUT	Males	38.73	5.122	2.663	318.0	.008
	Females	37.11	5.736			

Note. SPINT = Spousal Intimacy; SPFUS = Spousal Fusion/Individuation; NFT = Nuclear Family Triangulation; INTINT = Intergenerational Intimacy; INFUS = Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; INTTRI = Intergenerational Triangulation; INTIM = Intergenerational Intimidation; PERAUT = Personal Authority.

.389, adjusted $R^2 = .373$, $F(8, 317) = 24.57$, $p < .001$. That is, individuals experiencing higher degrees of intimacy and satisfaction with their spouses, and less triangulation with their spouses and children tended to be less avoidant. Those who experienced less triangulation with their significant others or parents tended to be more avoidant.

Gender differences in PAFS-Q scale scores

To determine gender differences in measures of PAFS-Q constructs we conducted independent-samples t-tests. Gender differences were found only for the Personal Authority scale, $t(318) = 2.663$, $p < .05$ (Table 4). The results showed that males scored higher ($M = 38.73$) than women ($M = 37.11$). That is, males reported a greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the associations between adult attachment in close relationships measured by attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety, and the PAFS

constructs, including individuation, triangulation, intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational intimidation. The second aim of this research was to assess the gender differences in PAFS-Q dimensions. We utilized data from 160 couples, with adult attachment being examined by the ECR (Brennan et al, 1998), and personal authority constructs measured using the PAFS-Q (Bray et al., 1984a, 1984b).

The results revealed some relevant associations between dimensions stemming from attachment theory and personal authority theory. Individuals with higher levels of spousal intimacy and lower levels of triangulation with their spouses and children tended to be less avoidant in their close relationships. Our findings are in concordance with Ng and Smith (2006) results who showed that higher degrees of intimacy with spouses and less triangulation with spouses and children are in association with less avoidance in close relationships. According to Bowlby (1988), individuals with higher levels of avoidance would tend to experience discomfort with closeness, and would therefore avoid closeness in relationships. Individuals with higher levels of avoidance in close relationships tended to report less intimacy. Furthermore, according to Senchack and Kenneth (2009), avoidant behavioral style (e.g., hostility or withdrawal) is associated with partner's negative feelings, which is often related to dissatisfaction in close relationships. According to our results, individuals experiencing higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction with their spouses, greater individuation with their spouses and their significant others or parents, as well as greater levels of personal authority tended to report lower levels of anxiety. Our results regarding spousal intimacy are in accordance with Ng and Smith's (2006) results. Based on Williamson assumptions (1991), greater individuation and greater personal authority means that the adult gives up the need to be parented both emotionally and behaviorally. Such individuals are able to take full emotional responsibility for their lives and no longer hold parents responsible for their basic nurturance or protection (Skowron, Holmes, & Sabatelli, 2003; Skowron et al., 2009). However, individuation includes the concept of intimacy, which implies relational closeness with distinct boundaries to the self, and may be initiated or terminated by choice (Lawson & Brossart, 2001; Lawson, Kieffer, & Kevin, 2006; Lewis, Beavers, Gossett, & Phillips, 1976). Intimacy includes trust, self-disclosure, love and fondness, commitment, and mutual respect, at the same time maintaining individuation (Bray, 2004; Bray et al., 1984a, 1984b). Genuine intimacy occurs between equals, and hence is freely chosen rather than borne of obligation. To achieve intimacy with another person requires a strong sense of "otherness of the second party" (Williamson, 1981a, p. 445). Taken all together, it seems that high levels of spousal intimacy and satisfaction, high levels of individuation in relationships with significant others (spouses and parents), and a greater ability to interact in relationships in an individuated and intimate manner could be considered as protective factors against anxiety (fear of rejection and

abandonment in close relationships), while greater intimacy in spousal relationships and less triangulation between spouses could be protective factors against avoiding intimacy in close relationships.

Our results provide partial support for our second hypothesis on gender differences in PAFS variables. Significant gender differences were found only on the Personal Authority variable. Males reported a greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females. This could be because for men gender identity is based on an emotional separateness, and females' gender identity is based more on an emotional connectedness (Garbarino et al., 1995). Other research (Lawson & Brossart, 2004; Skowron, Holmes, & Sabatelli, 2003) also found gender differences on PAFS-Q. However, the amount of studies that aimed to identify gender differences using PAFS-Q is low and the results are contradictory. Jankowski and Hooper (2012) did not find gender differences in PAFS constructs. Furthermore, gender differences found in this study must be interpreted cautiously given the sample size. Further studies should be conducted in future to identify if gender differences really exist in PAFS constructs.

Limitations and conclusions

Several limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, a sample of convenience was used and the sample size was relatively small, which limits generalization of the results. Future studies should involve larger and more demographically representative samples. A second limitation of the current research is the use of cross-sectional data. A longitudinal approach might contribute better understandings of the causal relationships between attachment dimensions and intergenerational family relationships. A further limitation is the use of self-assessment questionnaires, as they mostly rely on memory recall, with the precision of response being subject to personal feelings. In future research additional measures, such as observation and interview formats, should be utilized. A further limitation of this study is that PAFS-Q does not compare any other family member's perspective on family system issues. The questionnaire utilizes multigenerational questions, but only from the perspective of the individual completing the measure. Future research might include participants' family members as well (e.g., parents, children).

Despite these limitations, our data provided some important results on attachment related anxiety and avoidance and personal authority constructs (individuation, triangulation, intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational intimidation). High levels of spousal intimacy and satisfaction, high level of individuation in relationships with significant spouses and parents, and a greater ability to interact in relationships with an individuated and intimate manner were associated with lower levels of attachment related anxiety,

while greater intimacy in spousal relationships and less triangulation between spouses were associated with lower levels of avoiding intimacy in close relationships. Results has also revealed some small gender differences in terms of personal authority constructs, with males reporting a greater ability to interact with their parents in an individuated and intimate manner than did females. However, future research should further focus on discovering gender differences in personal authority constructs and their relationships with the attachment related avoidance and anxiety. Future researches should also focus on understanding how Williamson's PAFS constructs relate to Bowen's family of origin theory components.

In closing, our data suggest that high levels of spousal intimacy and satisfaction, high levels of individuation in relationships with significant others and greater ability to interact in relationships in an individuated and intimate manner could be considered as protective factors against anxiety due to closeness (i.e., fear of rejection and abandonment in close relationships). Furthermore, greater intimacy in spousal relationships and less triangulation between spouses could be considered as protective factors against avoiding intimacy (i.e., discomfort with closeness and discomfort with depending on others) in close relationships. Achieving levels of healthier intergenerational family relationships could lead to more constructive ways to resolve the conflicts in romantic relationships and thus, to greater relationship intimacy and satisfaction, which is further expected to be recreated in the future generations' relationships as well.

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