Attachment Theory And Intimate Partner Violence

Humans are social creatures. We have all heard this statement at some point throughout our years in school: may it be from your primary school teacher encouraging you to go around the room and befriend kids in your class; your world history teacher from sixth grade teaching you about how civilization was first established several hundred years ago, or your college professor from psychology class explaining how the behavior of a single individual influence those of the people surrounding them. Evidently, mankind is highly dependent on their relationships with the people around them.

Even as infants, we all react differently whenever we get separated from our primary caregivers. Some babies cry nonstop until they get to feel their mothers' touch again. Some either resist or cry even more when touched by a stranger. Some infants stay passive, quiet, and apathetic when left alone. A few, however, tend to be more accepting of the comfort of people that they are not so familiar with.

From his observation regarding these different reactions, John Bowlby, a psychologist, and psychoanalyst, was able to identify the three stages of separation anxiety. When first separated from its caregiver, the infant will cry, refuse the comfort of a stranger, and instead look for their caregiver. He called this the protest stage. As the separation persists, the infant still becomes sad, but seems passive and doesn't seem to care. He called the second stage despair. The third stage is detachment. It is believed that this trait is only exclusive to humans. It is here that infants learn to be detached from people, including their caregivers. When this happens, they tend to avoid and/or disregard their caregiver when they get back, and even show no signs of being upset when the caregiver leaves again. With Bowlby's theory, Mary Ainsworth and her associates (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) developed a technique for measuring the types of attachment styles that exist between caregiver and infant. They were able to classify them into three ratings: secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant. Although attachment bonds in adulthood obviously differ from the infant-caregiver relationships, Bowlby believes that the relationships a person forms during his childhood not only affect his mental functioning but also leave a great impact on the bonds he will make as an adult. To support this theory, a classic study of adult attachment was conducted by Cindy Hazen and Phil Shaver (1987) showed that securely attached adults did experience more trust and closeness in their love relationships compared to those with avoidant or anxious-avoidant attachment styles.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the preliminary results of the 2017 National Demographic and Health Survey showed that one in four ever-married women from ages 15-49 has experienced intimate partner violence (IPV); this may be physically, emotionally, psychologically, financially, or sexually.

Using this theory's perspective, intimate partner violence may be viewed as an attempt to establish or maintain security within the relationships. When a threat arises, individuals become alarmed and the anxiety it induces results in responses designed to preserve the attachment system. Since individuals belonging to the anxious-resistant group often possess attachment anxiety and/or fear of abandonment, this takes a toll on their partner. As we often see in movies or even sometimes in real life, some men refuse to let their partners go out with their friends

without their company, for instance. Sometimes, because of such issues, they even restrict their partners to have friends of a different gender. Personally, I firmly believe that this kind of treatment is completely emotionally and/or psychologically abusive, and no one deserves to settle for this kind of setup regardless of your attachment style. Those with avoidant attachment style, on the other hand, tend to be highly independent and self-sufficient – constantly suppressing symptoms of vulnerability or weaknesses to those around them. Without proper communication, this leaves little to no room for their partner to help and address their issues.

From my point of view, identifying your attachment style and actually understanding what it means really plays a great role when it comes to shaping your relationships as an adult – be it platonically or romantically. It is one way for you to determine what is it that you truly seek in relationships and the people you choose to mingle with. It also helps in knowing which kinds of people you think you're more compatible with. Personally, I never really asked my mother, my primary caregiver, how things were when I was a baby – if she used to be gone a lot or not. However, I think what played a huge part though was the fact that she was overseas most of my childhood and teenage years. She was gone for so long that I started to develop an avoidant attachment style. Regardless if it's a good thing or bad, I learned not to rely too much on other people, whether I'm close to them or not. This also resulted in issues in terms of emotionally expressing my affection and concerns towards those I associate with. Upon acquiring enough knowledge and understanding on the topic, I found that getting to know yourself and your personality is really something we should focus on in life.

That being said, although I admittedly do not possess a secure attachment style, it doesn't automatically mean that I would most likely commit intimate partner violence in the future. From the readings I've done throughout doing this essay, it is usually those who are with anxious-resistant partners who usually experience IPV. However, in my own opinion, being fully aware of your own emotions specifically during trying times is just as important. An individual's attachment style plays a role in IPV, yes, but it should never be used as an excuse or a form of justification for unruly behavior. As human beings, we should still be mindful of how we react to stressful stimuli. We still should be rational enough to choose decisions that we know are right and take the blame for our wrongdoings.