

Attachment Style in Violent and Non-Violent Offenders

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Attachment and Criminal Behavior

- Attachment style is typically studied in children as a predictor of behavior in adult interpersonal relationships. For example, children who suffer from severe abuse exhibit a higher likelihood of developing insecure attachment that remains intact throughout life (Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- However, attachment style has the potential to affect more than interpersonal relationships and may be linked with behaviors associated with violent and non-violent crimes (Ogilvie, Newman, Todd & Peck, 2014).
- Previous research has shown a relationship between insecure attachment and criminal behavior including both violent and non-violent acts, as well as sexual offenses (Christian, Sellbom, & Wilkinson, 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Specifically, insecure attachment style with either psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder comorbidity has been linked to criminal behavior in individuals who report severe abuse during childhood (Christian et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Previous research that examined the relationship between the different insecure attachment styles (avoidant, anxious ambivalent, and disorganized) and criminal behavior found a relationship between the development of attachment style and violent and non-violent behavior later in life (Ogilvie et al., 2014).
- Children with insecure attachment styles tend to display significantly lower levels of empathy than other children, specifically when their peers or family members are experiencing distress (Hansen et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Attachment theorists suggest that dysfunctional communication patterns between a parent and child create distrust in a child toward other people as well as themselves (Renn, 2002).

- Studies have also shown that children who display insecure attachment styles also experience an increased likelihood to display aggressive and violent behaviors (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- As aggressive behaviors and lack of empathy tend to evolve into adulthood, poorly attached individuals also pose higher risk of developing habitual substance abuse, which further increases their likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior (Renn, 2002).
- Previous research suggests that unresolved childhood trauma further facilitates both violent and non-violent criminal behavior in adults (Renn, 2002).
- In addition to findings which show increased likelihood of developing violent and non-violent criminality in cases of individuals with insecure attachment style, studies have shown that violent offenders tend to display more avoidant and anxious ambivalent attachment styles compared to their peers who committed non-violent offenses (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Individuals who commit sexual offenses also display differences in their attachment styles. Those who commit rape tend to display a more avoidant attachment style, much like their peers who commit violent offenses (Ogilvie et al., 2014).
- However, individuals who commit sexual assault and not rape are more likely to display anxious ambivalent attachment style like their peers who committed non-violent offenses (Ogilvie et al., 2014).

Nature vs. Nurture

- A nature versus nurture debate has shaped the discussion surrounding the relationship between attachment disorders and criminal behavior, especially as it relates to impulse control and empathy (Christian et al., 2017).
- Some researchers theorized that an individual's awareness of the potential consequences for participating in criminal activity may be significantly affected by his or her upbringing (Christian et al., 2017).
- Other researchers emphasized an organic component in the development of attachment style, theorizing that genetic factors may play a more significant role in attachment style than one's upbringing (Christian et al., 2017).
- Overall, research has shown that genetic factors are more likely to affect the development of attachment style, and negative childhood experiences with caregivers are more likely to affect deficits in adult relationships (Christian et al., 2017).
- Therefore, studying an offender's previous attachment history will be useful for clinicians in the field conducting risk assessments for future offenses.

Forensic Applications

- Examining attachment style in adult offenders has the potential to provide forensic psychologists valuable insight into individual offenders' likelihood to reoffend.
- With this extra insight, forensic psychologists will be able to effectively conduct risk assessments on violent and non-violent offenders.

Forensic Applications

- Research on attachment should be integrated into risk assessment instruments.
- Using the relevant research, it is hoped that psychologists will better identify youth who are at risk of becoming offenders.
- The research can also be used to develop prevention programs that reduce recidivism in at-risk individuals.
- In summary, with a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between attachment styles and criminal behavior, it should be possible to improve methods for determining risk in youth, implementing violence prevention, and reducing recidivism to lower criminality associated with unhealthy attachment styles.

References

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