

The Effects of Attachment Style on Levels of Empathy and Violence



Sierra N. Lynch, M.S.Ed., Benjamin I. Long, M.Div., Meera Patel, M.Ed.,
Carlos Taylor, M.S., & Kristine M. Jacquin, Ph.D.

Summary

- Attachment style has traditionally been studied in children as a predictor of their behavior in adult interpersonal relationships.
- Attachment styles examined include secure and insecure attachment styles; avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, and disorganized are subtypes of insecure attachment styles (Christian et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2011; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Prior research indicated that insecure attachment style correlates with childhood abuse (Christian et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Children who present an insecure attachment style resulting from abuse or neglect are likely to transfer their behaviors from childhood to their adult interpersonal relationships (Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Attachment style has also been linked to violent and sexually violent criminal behaviors (Ogilvie, Newman, Todd & Peck, 2014).
- Specifically, prior research indicated that insecurely attached individuals are more likely to exhibit lower levels of empathy and increased violent and sexually violent behaviors (Christian, Sellbom, & Wilkinson, 2017; Hansen et al., 2011; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- According to most of the previous research, insecure attachment styles show a negative correlation to levels of empathy; insecurely attached individuals tend to display lower levels of empathy, possibly due to childhood trauma (Hansen et al., 2011; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).

- However, previous research has also found that teenagers who have been victims of childhood trauma display similar levels of empathy to other teenagers (Jones, Cisler, Morais, & Bai, 2018).
- In addition, it has been suggested that childhood trauma serves as an independent contributor to violent and sexually violent behavior perpetrated in adulthood (Renn, 2002).
- Lower levels of empathy and violent behaviors tend to correlate with a higher risk of substance abuse, which further increases the risk of violent behavior (Day, Casey, & Gerace, 2010; Renn, 2002).
- Prior research has also demonstrated that children who exhibit insecure attachment styles have an increased likelihood of committing violence and sexual violence depending upon the type of insecure attachment (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Previous research has shown patterns between the types of crime committed by offenders with the type of insecure attachment displayed (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Those with avoidant or anxious-ambivalent attachment styles are more likely to commit violent offenses (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- Others who commit acts of sexual assault typically display anxious-ambivalent attachment styles compared to their avoidant attachment style peers who have a higher likelihood of committing rape (Christian et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2014; Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- No prior research has examined disorganized attachment style and types of crime committed.

- Prior research additionally examines the relationship between types of attachment styles in males versus females (Tussey, Tyler, & Simons, 2018).
- The research found that males have a higher likelihood of displaying avoidant attachment style and females have a higher likelihood of displaying anxious-ambivalent attachment style (Tussey, Tyler, & Simons, 2018).
- The quality of maternal relationship is also associated with violence perpetration for males and females (Tussey, Tyler, & Simons, 2018).



Forensic Implications

- Examining the effect of attachment style on empathy and engagement in violence will benefit the fields of forensic psychology and criminal justice.
- Research in the area of attachment style as it relates to empathy and violence will help forensic psychologists gain a better understanding of the individuals who are committing violent acts.
- Further, forensic psychologists may be able to better assess for recidivism risk and make recommendations for treatment based on the assessment of attachment style and empathy.

References

- Christian, E., Sellbom, M., & Wilkinson, R. B. (2017). Clarifying the associations between individual differences in general attachment styles and psychopathy. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment, 8*, 329-339. doi:10.1037/per0000206
- Day, A., Casey, S., & Gerace, A. (2010). Interventions to improve empathy awareness in sexual and violent offenders: Conceptual, empirical, and clinical issues. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 15*, 201-208. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2009.12.003
- Hansen, A. L., Waage, L., Eid, J., Johnsen, B. H., & Hart, S. (2011). The relationship between attachment, personality and antisocial tendencies in a prison sample: A pilot study. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 52*, 268-276. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9450.2010.00864.x
- Jones, S., Cisler, J., Morais, H., & Bai, S. (2018). Exploring neural correlates of empathy in juveniles who have sexually offended. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 30*, 82-103. doi:10.1177/1079063216630980
- Ogilvie, C. A., Newman, E., Todd, L., & Peck, D. (2014). Attachment & violent offending: A meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 19*, 322-339. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2014.04.007
- Renn, P. (2002). The link between childhood trauma and later violent offending: The application of attachment theory in a probation setting. *Attachment & Human Development, 4*, 294-317. doi:10.1080/14616730210167203
- Schimmenti, A., Passanisi, A., Pace, U., Manzella, S., Carlo, G. D., & Caretti, V. (2014). The relationship between attachment and psychopathy: A study with a sample of violent offenders. *Current Psychology, 33*, 256-270. doi:10.1007/s12144-014-9211-z
- Tussey, B. E., Tyler, K. A., & Simons, L. G. (2018). Poor parenting, attachment style, and dating violence perpetration among college students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 1-20*. doi:10.1177/0886260518760017