Sex Offenders’ Attachment Styles and Preferences for Therapists’ Interpersonal Qualities

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The aim of this study was to explore sex offenders’ childhood and adult attachment difficulties and assess the extent to which these were associated with preferences for therapists’ interpersonal qualities. One-hundred and twelve adult Australian male child sexual offenders were invited to provide self-report data on their developmental history, childhood and adult attachments, sexual offending, treatment experiences and preferences for therapists’ qualities believed to be important for effective treatment. Childhood and adult attachment problems were typical of this sample. A weak relationship between childhood and adulthood secure attachment was found, suggesting that attachment at the time of offending may be more relevant than childhood attachment to the etiology of sexual offending. Participants valued a range of therapists’ qualities previously identified as important for positive treatment change. Personal therapist characteristics perceived as most important for treatment effectiveness were trustworthiness and genuineness. Professional qualities perceived as most important included therapist competency and confidence. Therapist trust and genuineness were perceived as particularly important by those with attachment difficulties, demonstrating the need for these in offender programs where attachment difficulties would be expected. Less secure maternal attachment was associated with therapist trustworthiness and less secure paternal attachment with therapist genuineness. Adult attachment anxiety was positively associated with optimism, while adult attachment avoidance was inversely correlated with therapist genuineness. These differences highlight the importance of responsivity factors that are often overlooked in the provision of sex offender treatment programmes.

Goals of the Poster Presentation:
1. It is often assumed that childhood attachment difficulties lead to similar adult attachment difficulties. This research revealed only a weak relationship between childhood and adulthood secure attachment. This has a number of implications, for example, that attachment at the time of offending may be more relevant than childhood attachment to the etiology of sexual offending. The first goal of the presentation, therefore, is to highlight these findings and discuss the implication
for our understanding of the link between attachment and offending, and the possibilities for change in attachment styles.

2. The second goal is to examine the findings in relation to preferences for therapists' qualities. There are a number of questions and implications of these findings, for example, whether offenders’ attachment styles should be assessed prior to treatment and whether offenders with different attachment styles should be treated together or separately.

3. The third goal is to stress the importance of responsivity factors in treatment in light of these findings.