Examining the Assessment and Treatment of Adolescents with Illegal Sexual Behaviors through the Lens of Attachment

Symposium Chair: Jan Everhart Newman, J.D., Ph.D.
Auburn University

A growing body of literature has explored the importance of attachment in adolescents with illegal sexual behaviors (AISB; Burk & Burkhart, 2003; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Marshall & Marshall, 2000; Smallbone, 2006). Researchers have suggested that attachment problems can contribute to the onset of illegal sexual behaviors (ISB) in several ways. For example, insecure attachment may increase the likelihood that insecurely attached adolescents will try to fulfill their intimacy needs through inappropriate ways (Marshall & Marshall, 2000) or can reduce empathic capacity and increase emotional dysregulation resulting in an increased likelihood for a coercive interpersonal style (Smallbone, 2006). Accordingly, attachment theory contributes to our understanding of the unique pathway to ISB, highlighting potential differences between AISB and adolescents with general delinquent behaviors (AGDB) and also identifying critical areas for prevention and intervention.

In this symposium, we review the results of various studies conducted using data generated through a large, ongoing research project involving approximately 1,400 youth from AISB and AGDP samples. Shortly after entering the juvenile justice facility, youth complete an extensive multi-modal assessment protocol, which includes a detailed clinical interview and a comprehensive assessment battery measuring a variety of psychological dimensions such as attachment. Upon completion of this initial assessment for both AISB and AGDB, results are used to inform a case formulation, to identify targets for intervention, and to highlight individual risk and protective factors. AISB participate in individual and group treatment; whereas AGDB currently participate in rehabilitative, corrections-based programming. Post-treatment assessments are conducted prior to release to examine treatment progress and outcomes. Pre- and post-treatment data were used to examine and compare AISB and AGDP—providing insight into group differences in general attachment (i.e., to caregivers and peers) and other variables affected by attachment, including adolescent psychopathic traits and recidivism outcomes. Results provide insight into how attachment may be related to the onset of ISB through descriptive comparisons of these groups and to the maintenance of ISB or other criminal behavior in AISB through an examination of recidivism outcomes. Finally, we will use the lens of attachment to examine the role of treatment—specifically the therapeutic relationship—with AISB. Suggestions for research and treatment implications will be discussed.
Parental and Peer Attachment in AISB versus AGDB Populations: 
A Theoretical Approach

Ashley K. Norwood-Strickland, M.S.  
Auburn University  
Rebecca L. Fix, M.S.  
Auburn University

Etiological models of delinquency and, specifically, ISB have implicated the importance of attachment relationships. Bowlby (1973) described two internal representations of attachment relationships that form the basis for a child’s expectations about relationships outside the family: (a) whether the attachment figure is responsive to the child’s attachment needs, and (b) whether the child judges himself to be the type of individual to whom an attachment figure would respond in a helpful way. Thus, childhood attachment is an inherently reciprocal phenomenon with complex implications for interpersonal functioning with parents and family, but also peers and future partners. During adolescence, internal representations of attachment relationships are further complicated by the fluctuating developmental context including the development of sexual attitudes that influence interpersonal interactions and alter perceptions of how to meet attachment needs (Bretherton, 1990; Miner et al., 2010; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Given the complexity of attachment, many variables are linked to attachment problems in youth, including associations with behavioral misconduct (Leve, Kim, & Pears, 2005). Through the lens of attachment, these externalizing behaviors may be interpreted as effective, yet poorly executed methods to elicit proximity and attentiveness from the attachment figure.

Current research examining the role of attachment in the onset of ISB has yielded inconsistent results and further research is needed (Seto & Lalumière, 2010). The current study is aimed at examining parental and peer attachments in AISB and AGDP samples to determine what patterns of attachment and its role in the etiology of behavioral misconduct. Attachment will be examined using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), which includes total scores for peer and parental attachment. The IPPA is comprised of subscales for trust, communication, and alienation for each domain. Initial results in a total sample of approximately 1,400 participants indicated significant differences between AISB and AGDP for various components of attachment. The primary focus of this presentation will be on understanding the role of attachment in distinguishing the groups, and thus, providing insight into the onset of ISB. Implications for research and treatment will also be discussed.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Provide an overview of the literature relating to parental and peer attachment for AISB and AGDB.
2. Examine the attachment differences within AISB and AGDB populations.
3. Highlight areas for future research to inform attachment-focused treatment interventions, as well as research with AISB.

The Relationship between Parental Attachment, Psychopathic Traits, and Offending in AISB

Jan Everhart Newman, JD, PhD
Auburn University

A growing body of literature has explored the importance of attachment in AISB (Burk & Burkhart, 2003; Marshall & Marshall, 2000; Spice et al., 2012). Researchers have posited that insecure attachment contributes to the onset of illegal sexual behaviors because poorly attached individuals are more likely to exhibit social skills deficits and interpersonal problems, and, thus, are more likely to try to fulfill their intimacy needs through inappropriate means (e.g., Marshall & Marshall, 2000; Seto & Lalumière, 2010). Notably, recent findings by Spice and colleagues (2012) identified that strong attachments and bonds serve as a protective factor for nonsexual recidivism in AISB. Problematic attachment relationships have also been associated with a variety of serious psychological problems in youth including psychopathic traits (Kosson et al., 2002), which are associated with higher levels of delinquency and reoffending in AISB (Caldwell, Ziemke, & Vitacco, 2008). Further research is necessary to determine how both peer and parental attachment relationships relate to psychopathic traits and recidivism in this population.

The primary objective of the current study is to examine these relationships in a large, archival sample of approximately 1,400 youth. We will first examine the relationships between psychopathic traits and peer and parental attachment. Psychopathic traits will be examined using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV) with a focus on dimensional scores (i.e., Interpersonal, Affective, Lifestyle, and Antisocial) while peer and parental attachment will be examined using the IPPA with a focus on the trust, communication, and alienation subscales. We will review results obtained when examining the relationship between attachment and the onset of illegal sexual behaviors (i.e., comparing AISB to a sample of non-AISB controls). Next, the relationship between these variables and the maintenance of criminal behavior including ISB (i.e., general, violent, nonviolent, and sexual recidivism outcomes) will be compared in a smaller sample of approximately 1,000 youth. Preliminary results indicated significant group differences between AISB and AGDP in terms of PCL:YV scores. Both IPPA and PCL:YV scores were predictive of group membership (AISB vs. AGDP). Finally, PCL:YV and IPPA scores were associated with all recidivism outcomes, except sexual recidivism. We hope that better understanding of these relationships will provide insight into the importance of parental attachment with AISB and will inform both prevention and later treatment. Implications for future research and treatment development will be discussed.
Goals of the Paper:
1. Describe the literature relating to parental attachment and criminal behavior as well as psychopathic traits in AISB.
2. Provide a better understanding of these relationships in AISB to inform treatment and prevention with this population.
3. Identify areas for future research to inform intervention, research, and policy efforts with AISB.

Using Attachment and the Therapeutic Relationship to Enhance Treatment Outcomes

Melissa Cyperski, M.S.
Auburn University

Forming a positive and collaborative working relationship with a therapist is perceived to be one of the key change agents in the psychotherapeutic process (Bordin, 1979). For adults, a number of client factors have been shown to moderate the strength of the therapeutic alliance (TA), including quality of interpersonal relationships and attachment history (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991). Few studies have examined the factors that predispose alliance formation with children and adolescents (Hogue et al., 2006). Findings from initial studies suggest that adolescents who report strong attachments with adult caregivers also report strong alliances with their therapist (Storer, 2010). However, many youths who exhibit problematic sexual behaviors come from dysfunctional family environments and have a history of adverse experiences such as trauma and neglect, which may lead to maladaptive attachment patterns. Such experiences impact the child’s relational schema (Bowlby, 1973) and can reduce his interest or ability to form future relationships with caregivers, including therapists (Bolton Oetzel & Scherer, 2003; Eltz, Shirk, & Sarlin, 1995; Ross et al., 2008). Further research is needed to understand how children and adolescents with a history of maladaptive experiences approach the TA and, subsequently, how providers can strengthen the TA to enhance treatment outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to examine patterns of the TA among AISB who are currently enrolled in residential treatment. Specifically, we hope to explore the relative impact of attachment and adverse interpersonal experiences on the TA. We hypothesize that AISBs with maladaptive attachment patterns and/or those who have experienced childhood maltreatment will exhibit a greater latency period to forging positive TAs and, thus, will experience truncated clinical improvement. Additionally, within residential treatment, children and adolescents frequently interact with various counselors, teachers, residential staff members, and administrators—establishing every relationship within the institution as an opportunity for attachment and a corrective emotional experience (Shirk
& Saiz, 1992). Therefore, we aim to explore the relative impact of forming relationships with a variety of adult caregivers across the treatment milieu. We expect that attachment relationships formed with residential staff members and therapists alike will be important to clinical improvement. We hope to provide empirical evidence that will support and encourage systems to invest fiscal and human resources in building positive, collaborative, and genuine relationships with at risk youths. We will describe efforts being implemented at our facility to enhance the quality of student-staff relationships and offer recommendations for other systems-based providers.

Goals of this Paper:

1. Discuss the impact of adverse childhood experiences on attachment formation and, specifically, the therapeutic relationship.
2. Describe how attachment theory can be applied to enhance the therapeutic process and subsequent treatment outcome.
3. Identify areas for future research and provide recommendations for intervention efforts with AISB, particularly in residential treatment settings.