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**T-28**

### **Pathways to Youth Sexual Violence: Abuse, Attachment, and Dysregulation**

Symposium Chair: Jamie R. Yoder, PhD, MSW  
Colorado State University

Many etiological models have delineated pathways to youth sexual violence through developmental experiences including sexual and physical abuse (Knight & Sims-Knight, 2004), attachment styles (Beech & Mitchell, 2005), and emotional and behavioral dysregulation (Ward, 2014). Some theoretical frameworks even integrate these concepts as causal steps to sexual violence (Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2016; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Marshall & Marshall, 2000; Ward, 2014), as the intersection of early life abuse, and relational experiences or attachment significantly contribute to deficits in regulation that can sequentially lead to sexual violence behaviors. However, while different iterations of these etiological models have been proposed, there remains a dearth of research in the field that tests the linear succession between early developmental risk factors and later sexual violence.

In this symposium, we will present three interrelated rigorous research papers that empirically explore the connections between early life abuse, attachment, emotional regulation, and callous/unemotional traits. In the first paper, we will elucidate the linkage between sexual abuse experiences within the context of relationship to the perpetrator and risk for emotional dysregulation, sexualization, and callous/unemotional traits. In the second paper, we will present research that explores the direct relationship between physical and sexual abuse and other adverse childhood experiences and four differential emotional and behavioral dysregulation outcomes while also determining the mediating effects of anxious and avoidant attachment. In the third paper, we will present findings that reveal consecutive linkages and intermediary pathways between anxious and avoidant attachment, four differential forms of dysregulation, callousness, delinquency, and sexual violence. Treatment, research, and policy implications will be discussed after each presentation.

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### **Relationship Matters: Attachment and Learning in Theory, Research, and Practice**

Ariel K. Berman, MA  
Western Michigan University  
Raymond A. Knight, PhD  
Brandies University

Approximately one- to two-thirds of male youths who have sexually offended (JMSOs) report having experienced sexual abuse when they were children (e.g., 71.4%, Edwards et al., 2005; 60.5%, Gunn, 2008; 43.3%, Hunter & Figueredo, 2000; 31%, Worling, 1995). Many models of sexual offending suggest that childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a key developmental antecedent to sexually coercive and aggressive behavior in youth and adults. However, the variables that mediate or moderate the relationship between sexual abuse and abusing behaviors require further elucidation. In this presentation we will a) review attachment and social learning theories that serve as the foundation for understanding the importance of the relationship in CSA and subsequent adaptation, b) explore 3 different operationalizations of closeness (known/stranger, biological relative/non-relative and never lived-with/cohabitant) of the relationship between a JMSO and individuals who had sexually abused them and which variables best predict Emotional Dysregulation, Sexualization, and Callous/Unemotional traits in a sample of 178 JMSOs (i.e. Berman & Knight, 2015), and c) relate these findings and theoretical concepts to the practical assessment and treatment of JMSOs.

For this study, we used self-report data from the Multidimensional Assessment of Sex and Aggression (e.g. Knight & Cerce, 1994). We found that experiencing CSA perpetrating by at least one individual who lived with the youth for at least three months

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was the best predictor for measures of Emotional Dysregulation (Wilks'  $\lambda = .90$ ,  $F(8, 338) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .02$  (two-tailed), Callous/Unemotional traits (Wilks'  $\lambda = .95$ ,  $F(4, 346) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .03$  (one-tailed)), and Sexualization (Wilks'  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(6, 340) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .03$  (one-tailed)). In contrast, being biologically-related to a perpetrator was not predictive of any of our outcome measures. We will discuss these findings and their relevance for assessment and clinical practice with youths with sexual behavior problems.

### **Learning Goals:**

At the end of the presentation, the participants will be able to:

- Develop a working understanding of basic principles of social learning theory and how they relate to attachment theory.
- Increase their knowledge of the factors related to measuring closeness and the difference in experience and outcome for youths who experience CSA from a cohabiting vs. non-cohabiting perpetrator as well as correlates of cohabitant offending.
- Increase their understanding of the practical implications in prevention and intervention efforts with youths who experienced CSA perpetrated by a cohabiting individual.

### **Childhood Maltreatment Experiences, Attachment, Sexual Offending: Testing a Model**

Melissa D. Grady, PhD, LICSW  
Catholic University of America  
Jamie R. Yoder, PhD, MSW  
Colorado State University  
Adam Brown, PhD  
City University of New York

Childhood maltreatment experiences (CMEs) such as physical and sexual abuse and other adverse childhood experiences including exposure to violence have been shown in the literature to be a risk factor for subsequent sexual abusive behaviors (Abbiati et al., 2014; Reavis, Looman, Franco, & Rojas, 2013). However, while the mechanisms or pathways that link these experiences to later offending behaviors have been delineated in various etiological models (Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2016; Marshall, 2010; Ward, Hudson, & Marshall, 1996) there is little research that has empirically tested the connections from CMEs to offending. For example, some authors propose that cognitive processes are affected by traumatic experiences, which leads individuals to develop distorted thinking patterns that support sexually violent behaviors (Egan, Kavanagh, & Blair, 2005; Ward, Fon, Hudson, & McCormack, 1998). Others suggest that neurobiological changes impact impulse control and affect regulation (Mitchell & Beech, 2011).

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Specifically, attachment theory has also been used to explain how early experiences can either positively or negatively influence the development of certain capacities, such as empathy, affect regulation, and interpersonal skills (Beech & Mitchell, 2005; Miner, Romine, Robinson, Berg, & Knight, 2014). Grady, Levenson, and Bolder (2016) have proposed a theoretical model that links ACEs to the development of insecure attachments that lead to emotional or behavioral regulation problems that then contribute to sexual offending behaviors. The current study was designed to test this theoretical model by empirically exploring the temporal order of the relationships between physical, sexual abuse, and other ACE's, avoidant and anxious attachment, regulation difficulties, and sexual offending.

This study draws from data on adolescents adjudicated of sexual and non-sexual crimes in a western state ( $N=200$ ). Two structural equation models (SEM) tested direct and indirect relationships between adverse childhood experiences, anxious and avoidant attachment styles, and regulation deficits including cognitive and behavioral transitions, emotional control, and inhibited/impulsive behaviors, and type criminal offending (sexual or non-sexual). Two separate models were run that tested the effects of anxious and avoidant attachment. Results from the anxious attachment model (RMSEA= .022, CI= .000-.046; CFI=.998; TLI =.996) and the avoidant attachment model revealed good fit (RMSEA=.032 CI=.000-.052; CFI=.994; TLI=.991). The standardized path results indicated there were statistically significant relationships between physical abuse and anxious attachment ( $\beta=.313, p=.035$ ) and avoidant attachment ( $\beta=.302, p=.022$ ). In both models, sexual abuse experiences was associated with greater likelihood for committing a sexual crime ( $\beta=.353, p=.003$ ) and ( $\beta=.373, p=.002$ ), respectively. In the anxious attachment model, other ACEs were associated with greater behavioral transitions difficulties ( $\beta=.139, p=.046$ ), impulsivity ( $\beta=.186, p=.003$ ), and emotional control difficulties ( $\beta=.194, p=.004$ ). Finally, anxious attachment was linked to more behavioral transition difficulties ( $\beta=.556 (.06), p<.001$ ), cognitive transition difficulties ( $\beta=.500, p<.001$ ), impulsivity ( $\beta=.484, p<.001$ ), and emotional control difficulties ( $\beta=.515, p<.001$ ); similar significant results were found in the avoidant model, with minor changes in coefficients. In both models, attachment mediated the relationship between physical abuse and regulation.

There are numerous implications that can be taken from this study. During the presentation we focus especially on how practitioners can use this information to both assess and intervene in practice with adolescents and their families. In addition, we will discuss the role that these risk factors potentially play in the development of sexual offending behaviors.

### **Learning Goals:**

At the end of the presentation, the participants will be able to:

- Articulate the basic principles of attachment theory, including how the characteristics associated with insecure attachments are similar to criminogenic needs in individuals who commit sexual crimes
- Explain the various links between child maltreatment experiences and delinquency
- Identify which criminogenic needs potentially have the strongest influence on whether someone offends

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### **Attachment Styles, Dysregulation, Criminogenic Needs, and Successive Sexual Offending**

Jamie R. Yoder, PhD, MSW  
Colorado State University  
Melissa D. Grady, PhD, LICSW  
Catholic University of America  
Adam Brown, PhD  
City University of New York  
Rebecca Dillard, MSW  
Ohio State University

Attachment theory has been posited as a viable etiological explanation underlying the manifestation of sexual violence (Beech & Mitchell, 2005; Miner, Romine, Robinson, Berg, & Knight, 2014). Some studies have denoted differences between adolescent sexual and non-sexual offenders relative to attachment characteristics, specifically trust, communication, and alienation with caregivers (Yoder et al., 2016). Other complimentary research has found elevated rates of certain attachment styles, specifically anxious attachments, among adolescents who commit sexual crimes relative to non-sexual offenders (Miner et al., 2014). In these aforementioned studies, insecure attachments were connected to later sexual offending behaviors. However, the linkage between attachment and sexual offending may be better explained by deficit-based mediational pathways including emotional or affect regulation (Ward, 2014; Zaremba & Keiley, 2011). In fact, individuals with insecure attachments have been found to display emotional dysregulation, intimacy challenges, and cognitive distortions related to relationships (Benoit, 2004; DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008; Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011). Even still, it is possible that adolescents with insecure attachments commit sexual crimes also because of the formation of criminogenic needs (CNs) resulting from dysregulation (Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2016).

The current study endeavors to test these complex direct and mediational relationships. Using data on adolescents adjudicated of sexual and non-sexual crimes in a western state ( $N=200$ ), two structural equation models (SEM) tested direct and indirect relationships between anxious and avoidant attachment styles (in separate models), dysregulation including cognitive and behavioral transitions, emotional control, and inhibited/impulsive behaviors, callousness signifying a criminogenic need, delinquency and offending type (sexual or non-sexual offending). Results from the anxious attachment model (RMSEA= .047, CI= .0021-.069; CFI=.989; TLI =.9982) and the avoidant attachment model revealed good fit (RMSEA=.027 CI=.000-.053; CFI=.996; TLI=.993). The standardized path results indicated there were statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ) relationships between anxious and avoidant attachments and all dysregulation factors with pathway coefficients ranging from  $\beta=.491$  to  $\beta=.616$ . In the anxious attachment model, attachment ( $\beta=-.174$ ,

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$p=.024$ ), impulsivity ( $\beta=.144, p=.016$ ), and emotional control ( $\beta=.237, p<.0001$ ) was associated with callousness. Callousness ( $\beta=.230, p=.001$ ) and emotional control ( $\beta=.349, p=.001$ ), was associated with delinquency, and delinquency ( $\beta=-.553, p<.001$ ), impulsivity ( $\beta=.294, p=.001$ ), and behavioral transitions ( $\beta=-.226, p=.021$ ) were associated with sexual offending. In the avoidant attachment model, emotional control ( $\beta=.220, p<.001$ ) was associated with callousness. Callousness ( $\beta=.249, p<.001$ ) and emotional control ( $\beta=.324, p=.001$ ) was associated with delinquency, and delinquency ( $\beta=-.571, p<.001$ ), impulsivity ( $\beta=.328, p=.001$ ), and behavioral transitions ( $\beta=-.233, p=.041$ ) were associated with sexual offending. In both models, there were multiple indirect effects between relationships.

The results from these analyses adhere closely to the Grady et al. (2016) model in demonstrating a linear progression from early attachment formation to later risk for sexual offending behavior. The implications from this study can inform how prevention and early intervention programming for juveniles can infuse more attachment and relational experiences within families and between peer groups. Given that relational experiences are critical for positive youth development, programs can consider tailoring services to promote or enhance interactions between caregivers and youth and also develop prosocial connections within peer groups. There are also significant implications for additional research that takes a prospective and longitudinal approach to collecting data on youth.

### **Learning Goals:**

At the end of the presentation, the participants will be able to:

- Articulate etiological models elucidating the relationships between attachment and sexual offending.
- Explore the multiple intervening associations between attachment and later sexual offending
- Integrate aspects of findings into practice, specifically how building relational capacity between youth, caregivers, and peer groups may help mitigate pathways to sexual offending.

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**Jamie Yoder, PhD** is Assistant Professor of Social Work at The School of Social Work, Colorado State University. Dr. Yoder has practice experience working with sexually abusive youth and victims of sexual crimes. Her research interests span etiology, prevention initiatives, and equitable and effective intervention strategies for sexually abusive youth with a particular focus on systemic strength-based services. Her scholarship record thus far exemplifies her dedication to advancing theory, practice, and policy in the delinquency and sexual abuse fields. Dr. Yoder has been a lead author and has co-authored many peer-reviewed articles related to these topics. Yoder is has statistical and analytical expertise, evidenced by her substantial academic record as an emerging scholar.

**Ariel K Berman, MA** is a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at Western Michigan University. He holds Masters degrees in Clinical Psychology from Western Michigan University and Psychology from Brandeis University where he is currently a Visiting Scholar in the Development, Sex, and Aggression Laboratory. Ariel's research aims are to

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explore resiliency factors and the prevention of sexual aggression in youths at-risk of sexual behavior problems.

**Raymond A. Knight, PhD** is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Brandies University. Professor Knight's research focuses on aggressive behavior and fantasies in general and on sexual aggression, psychopathy, and bullying in particular. He is interested in etiology, life course, typological differentiation among aggressive individuals, and predicting both aggressive and adaptive outcomes. He has developed a contingency-based, computerized assessment tool, the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression, which serves as a core component of his multiple research programs.

**Melissa D. Grady, PhD** is Associate Professor of Social Work at the National Catholic School of Social Service at Catholic University in Washington DC where she teaches clinical practice and theory, research, and human development. She has clinical experience working with adolescents who have been convicted of sexual crimes and their families. In addition, she conducts research on sexual violence prevention, specifically on sexual offenders and on evidence-based practice. She has numerous peer review publications and has presented at international, national, and local conferences on sexual offending. She is a research member of ATSA. In addition, she maintains a psychotherapy private practice in Washington DC.

**Adam Brown, PhD** is Assistant Professor of social work at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, City University of New York, and a clinical consultant at the Institute for Sexual Wellness in Weymouth, MA. For more than ten years, Dr. Brown has been assessing and treating child, adolescent, and adult males with problem sexual behaviors. His research aim is sexual abuse prevention, with a focus on the etiology of youth and young adults who have sexually harmed. He is a clinical and research member of ATSA.

**Rebecca Dillard, Doctoral Student, College of Social Work, Ohio State University**  
Rebecca Dillard, M.S.W., is a doctoral student in The Ohio State University's College of Social Work. Rebecca currently works as a graduate research assistant, and her research interests include intervention and prevention services for juveniles who engage in sexually abusive behaviors, adverse childhood experiences as they relate to subsequent juvenile justice involvement, and developmental antecedents of problematic sexual behaviors in youth.