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The Effect of Attachment Type on Levels of Delinquency and Peer Relations

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to determine if a relationship exists between the attachment type of an individual and that individual's level of delinquency and also their peer relations. This was done by having the participant take the Adult Attachment Scale to place them into their attachment type, followed by the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale to determine the participant's level of delinquency, and finally the Index of Peer Relations to assess the amount of problems the participant has with his or her peers. Sixty-one Coastal Carolina students participated in the study and the results show that those with a secure attachment type will have lower levels of delinquency and are less likely to have problems with their peers.

Keywords: attachment theory, delinquency, peer relations

College enrollment has been on a continuous rise throughout the past decades. More students than ever are enrolling in secondary education. This kind of rise also leads to a rise in delinquent activities on campuses across the United States. Due to less parental supervision, less time in class, and an easier access to drugs and alcohol than before, play a role in the delinquent activities that occur on campuses (Betts & Huebner, 2002). Even before college students step on to campus for the first time they may have already been disposed to delinquent activities through their own attachment type that has been forming during childhood. Attachment type may be a factor of the delinquent tendencies of a student, and that manifests between birth and up to one year (Dixon, 2003).

After birth, the newborn will spend an enormous amount of time with its mom. The activities that occur during this time, such as feeding, talking, cleaning, playing, and comforting will all aid in creating a bond between a newborn and its mother. This bond, also known as attachment, is the first emotional connection a newborn will form and will be important for social development. The newborn will internalize his or her experiences through childhood and his or her social skills will begin to reflect the attachment type (Boshier, 2011).

Attachment is defined as the emotional connection people develop towards individuals that they regard to be important to them (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). To the child, the mother is the most important figure, and is also essential to his or her survival. Any sensitivity shown by the mother followed by her approachability acceptance of her child, communication between the two, and the way in which she reacts towards her child all play a role in the formation of attachment (Alzate, Carbonell, Plata, & Posada, 2004) The attachment that forms will fall into one of four categories: secure, avoidant, anxious, and disorganized (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

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Secure attachment is when the infant begins to cry after being separated from his or her mother, upon mothers return and after being consoled the infant will calm down and be able to return to normal activity (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Goldsmith, 2009). These secure attachment infants normally grow up to have happy relationships with others. They feel accepted by others, and believe people are pleasant, trustworthy, and that they are worth being loved (Freeney, 1998, Burger, 2006). When problems arise they will relax when help is given (Kart, 2002).

Avoidant attachment can be defined as the infant showing a premature, independent reunion with the mother (Ainsworth, 1978). Due to this type of reaction the infant is unable to use the mother as its secure base. If the infant begins to cry the mother may respond too slowly or not at all. Since the mother is unreliable, the infant will begin to not show signs of distress, such as crying, because of the mother's mixed responses. The infant begins to internalize all emotions, leading to distrust in later relationships and will be unable to share their problems (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

An anxious attachment is seen when an infant is clingy towards the mother and must know her whereabouts at any given time. She cannot be used as a secure base in these scenarios. Once distressed, infants find it difficult to return to their previous environment. These infants tend to grow up to have an overall negative opinion of people (Collins, 1996). They also lack confidence and experience more conflicts in their own relationships.

The final attachment category is disorganized. This type manifests when there is some sort of trauma in the infants life (Hess & Main, 2000). The trauma could include abuse and neglect. Disorganized attachment is a rare form. These infants grow up to have extremely low self-confidence and lack a general trust towards people (Sumner & Gungor, 1991).

Attachment theory assumes that cognitive, emotional, and social development occur within the confines of a relationship that the person deems to be important to them (Dolant et al., 1993). This bond, or attachment, that individuals come to have, is embedded during childhood, internalized and organized into personality patterns that guide the relationships that are formed in adulthood (Yusof, 2013). With this being said, those individuals who grow up in a supportive, loving, and caring home (those with a secure attachment type) will grow up with more confidence and the knowledge of when to seek support or protection from others. Individuals who are less fortunate and fall in the avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized attachment type may suffer from several long-term negative consequences (Bernard & Hayslett-McCall, 2002). These individuals see the world as a place of no comfort and completely unpredictable, they respond to this world by either going against it or shrinking back into a world of solitude (Bowlby, 1973).

The impact of the attachment type formed begins to be evident during adolescence and is further expressed during adulthood, with the lack of attachment leading to an increased level of delinquency (Benson & Parker, 2004). Adult social development and delinquent behavior are two factors that become especially evident (Bowlby, 1969, 1982).

Delinquent behaviors include theft, vandalism, fighting, selling drugs, carrying a weapon, and underage drinking, to name a few (Bauer et al., 2014). These are the type of behavior one may come to expect when a child comes from a home where there is a parent missing, quite possibly the person who is supposed to be the secure base of the child (Baer et al., 2002). When there is a strong attachment with the parent, the child will tend to spend more time with the parents, under direct supervision. With the lack of direct supervision from a parent figure an adolescent is given more time to commit such acts and the amount of unsupervised time only grows once the adolescent leaves for college (Hirschi, 1969).

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The social development may be stunted due to the attachment type that has come to manifest. An increase in problems with peers may be the result of a poor attachment type that has formed, one falling in the category of ambivalent, anxious, or disorganized. Since these types are not open to others and have no trust they tend to not allow anyone into the world that they created for fear that they will not be able to support them if they need it. These individuals feel it is easier to deal with problems that arise if they bottle up these emotions, but in actuality these negative emotions continue to grow, causing a negative peer relation.

For this study I intend to discover if a relationship exists between the attachment type of an individual and their levels of delinquency and general relations among their peers. I believe that those who have a secure attachment will have a lower delinquency level but a more positive peer relations. Those with the avoidant attachment type will have a significantly higher level of delinquency and a lower peer relations level. The final group, anxious attachment, will have the highest level of delinquency and the lowest peer relation level.

Methods

Participants

For this study there were sixty-one total participants (nineteen male, forty-two female, mean age= 21.5). There were forty-seven Caucasian, four Hispanic/Latino, eight African American, and two identified themselves as other. This sample was obtained using convenience sampling from Coastal Carolina University undergraduate students in various classroom. Each participant was given an Informed Consent form to sign and offered one to take with them for their records. As an incentive to participate in the study many participants received extra credit from their professors to participate.

Materials

For this study there were three surveys involved. The Adult Attachment Scale, the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale, and the Index of Peer Relations.

The Adult Attachment Scale is an eighteen item self-report questionnaire that has three factors: Depend, Close, and Anxiety. The Depend factor measures how much a person can depend on others, the Close factor measures how comfortable a person is with closeness and intimacy, and the Anxiety factor measures the level of anxiety a person feels about being unloved or abandoned. This is based on a five-point Likert scale (with one being not characteristic and five being very characteristic). Each of the three factors receives six items out of the eighteen, with some of the items being reverse scored. Once the points have been summed they are then averaged. Internal consistency has been found at the .75, .69, and .72 levels (coefficient alphas) respectively for Depend, Close, and Anxiety. Test-retest reliability after an interval of two months was found at .71, .68, and .52 respectively.

The Problem Behavior Frequency Scale is an eight item self-report questionnaire that is designed to measure the frequency of delinquent behaviors such as suspension, stealing, shoplifting, and cheating. Scoring is worded as never, one to two times, three to five times, six to nine times, ten to nineteen times, and twenty or more times. Point values are assigned one, two, three, four, five, and six respectively. The point values are then summed, with a higher score indicating a higher level of delinquency.

The Index of Peer Relations is a twenty-five item self-report questionnaire that is designed to measure the extent, magnitude, or severity of a problem the participant has with peers. Scoring ranges from numbers one to seven with one being none of the time, two being

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very rarely, three being a little of the time, four being some of the time, five being a good part of the time, six being most of the time, and seven being all of the time. To score this assessment, items one, four, seven, eight, eleven, twelve, fifteen through eighteen, twenty-one, and twenty-two are reverse scored. The sum of the twenty-five items, the number of response is subtracted from the sum, multiply that number by one hundred, and then divide the number by the number of responses multiplied by six. This will produce a number between zero and one hundred. The higher the score the greater the magnitude of problems in peer relations. Participants with a score above thirty may be experiencing a clinical problem while participants scoring above seventy have a higher probability for violence and are experiencing extreme stress.

This study was conducted in several different classrooms ranging from introductory to upper level classes. The participants were informed that the study was designed to assess levels of delinquency. Participants were given an informed consent form to read and sign before the study began and told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were obtained using convenience sampling and through the use of the Adult Attachment Survey assigned themselves to one of three independent variables (Close, Depend, and Anxiety).

Results

After conducting two one way ANOVAs (one ANOVA for the delinquency variable and one for the peer relations variable) the results showed that there was indeed a significant difference in both the delinquency and peer relations variable. Delinquency had a p-value of 0.0023 and peer relations had a p-value of 0.0049. Following the ANOVAs, a Tukey HSD was performed to determine which of the groups differed. The results of the Tukey HSD show that for the delinquency variable that Close attachment types significantly differ from the Depend attachment types, Close attachment types significantly differ from the Anxiety attachment types,

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but Depend attachment types do not significantly differ from Anxiety attachment types. For the peer relations variable, Close attachment types significantly differ from Depend attachment types, Close attachment types significantly differ from Anxiety attachment types, but Depend attachment types do not significantly differ from Anxiety types.

Discussion

The results that I obtained suggest that those with a secure attachment type (identified as Close by the Adult Attachment Scale) have lower levels of delinquency than those with an avoidant attachment type (identified as Depend by the Adult Attachment Scale) and also lower levels of delinquency than those with the anxious attachment type (identified as Anxiety by the Adult Attachment Scale). My results also showed that individuals with an avoidant attachment type do not significantly differ in levels of delinquency from those with anxious attachment type.

For the variable of peer relations, those with a secure attachment type had higher levels than those with avoidant and anxious attachment types. There was also not a significant difference in the level of peer relations between those with avoidant and anxious attachment types.

These results are mostly in line with my original hypothesis, that based on the literature and previous studies, those with secure attachment types are going to be less likely to participate in delinquent activities due to the strong bond between the caregiver which leads to more time spent with the caregiver, leaving less time for such activities. Individuals who fall into the secure attachment type category also believe that participation in such activities will lead to disapproval from their caregiver and that is something to be avoided at all costs.

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My hypothesis predicted there would be a significant difference between those with avoidant attachment type and anxious attachment type in both the variables of delinquency and peer relations, but my results indicated no significant difference. This could be due in part to both of those types being insecure, so being categorized in the same fashion would lead them to be grouped together instead of viewed separately, causing no difference between the two.

Limitations for this study may include factors that as an experimenter I was unable to control. If the participant takes the Adult Attachment Scale and has recently had an experience with a friend or significant other that has left them feeling they can no longer trust anyone then that would affect their score for attachment type. The opposite is also true, if a person has recently come into a relationship then they may still be on the honeymoon phase and think that all of the world is great. Another limitation would be that the settings were different. Time of day can influence how a participant answers questions because if they come in around lunch time and have not eaten all day, then he or she may rush through the surveys and could misread a question which could skew his or her results. Using a class could be considered a limitation because my sample was not entirely random and also because even though I tried to monitor the room for unnecessary noises there was still talking in the rooms.

If I were to run this study again I would consider inviting participants to come to a laboratory room and one by one administer the surveys. This would allow me to monitor for noise interruptions. I would also inform the participant that they should eat before entering the room to prevent being hungry during the study. Under this setting I would also be able to monitor cell phone usage which could have previously been a distracting factor.

This study, and others like it are important because it is time to realize that what caregivers, or parents, do to, and around, their infant will have lasting effects throughout their

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life. It would be important to provide this education to soon to be parents so that they can be aware that what they do now may be the reason their child grows up to be a strong leader in their community with many achievements, or if they grow up to be a recluse, completely cut off from the world. When caregivers, or parents, provide a nurturing and nourishing environment, their child will flourish and grow. But when there is no nurturing and nourishing environment the child will not be able to create relationships successfully and will have a stunted developmental growth.

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