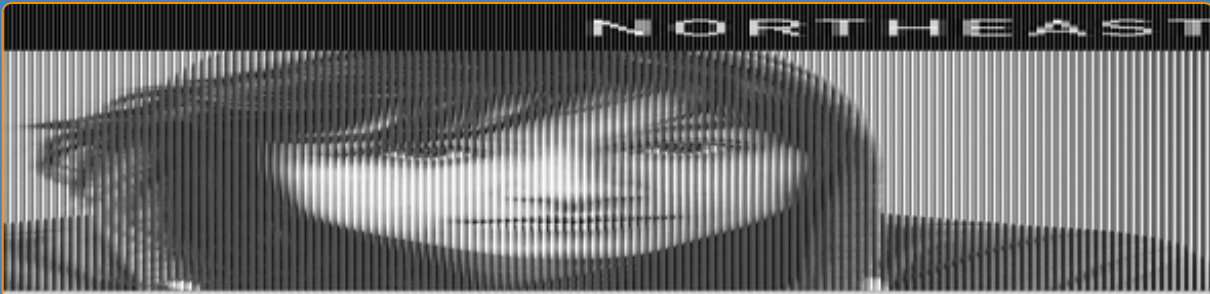


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Dear Colleague:

Until this research, there were too few studies of adolescent boys to understand the role of attachment in sexual abusive perpetration by adolescents. However in this most recent study, Michael Miner and his colleagues examined 325 adolescent males to explore the association between 1) insecure attachment, 2) social isolation, 3) sexuality, and 4) interpersonal adequacy in this population. The authors found that along with more commonly accepted behaviors indicating risk, this research supports a focus on attachment style and relationship capacity for both risk assessment and treatment interventions.

As always, if you have any other questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely, Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

Examining Attachment, Social Isolation and Sexual Compulsivity as Predictors of Sexually Abusive Behaviors in Teenage Boys

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

The Question

Do high-risk adult sex offenders follow the same pattern of desistance over time that other types of offenders have demonstrated?

The Research

Until this research, there were too few studies to understand the role of attachment in sexual abusive perpetration by adolescents (Seto and Lalumiere, 2010). However in its most recent study, Michael Miner and his colleagues examined 325 adolescent males to explore the association between 1) insecure attachment, 2) social isolation, 3) sexuality, and 4) interpersonal adequacy in this population.

Results indicated 1) a significant association between anxious attachment and sexual abuse perpetration and 2) support for the hypothesis that adolescents who have sexually abused had poor social involvement and anxiety interacting with female peers. Further, results showed that the factor most important for distinguishing youth who have sexually abused from those with other at-risk behaviors (such as substance abuse) was sexual compulsivity or a lack of control over their sexual behavior. The authors summarized the following common experiences of adolescent males who have sexually abused: anxious attachment with parents, poor self-esteem, view of his world as threatening, very little sense of personal effectiveness, feelings of isolation, and little sense of

themselves as adequately masculine, especially around females of the same age.

Interestingly, the study found little difference between the youth who sexually abused younger children and those who sexually abuse peers or adults. The exception was that the teens who sexually abused peers or adults appeared to have a lack of behavioral control rather than poor interpersonal functioning.

Finally, the authors clearly state that this study did not identify causal factors for sexually abusive behaviors but rather correlates to sexual offending. The results can be useful because they are associated with the early onset of sexually abusive behaviors or a variable that might influence the onset of these behaviors.

BOTTOM LINE:

Along with more commonly accepted behaviors indicating risk, this research supports a focus on attachment style and relationship capacity for both risk assessment and treatment interventions.

Implications for Professionals

Careful case formulation, accurate risk assessments and alignment of protective and other treatment factors with this risk reality are perhaps the most difficult and most critical components of the work we do.

As research continues to refine the factors that have yielded previous “gross” risk and outcome results, the professional toolkit expands with each study’s refinement. While over the years, attachment theory has influenced our understanding of the youth we serve, this research suggests that our case formulation should now consider an anxious attachment style along with lack of control over sexual behaviors, relationship capacity, and other factors identified above as important risk and treatment realities.

Implications for the Field

New research continues to guide us away from the “once an offender always an offender” narrative that once guided both our work and the public policy debate. It is becoming evident that as our understanding increases, we are seeing the need to differentiate smaller and smaller cohorts of sexually abusive youth that would align with more individualized intervention and management approaches.

Michael Miner’s research should push us into additional studies focusing not only on risk, as Miner has done, but also on the types of prevention programs and treatment that can address anxious attachment especially when correlated with hypersexuality and sexual compulsion. Such refinements will help individualize risk management protocols.

Abstract

It has been suggested that child sexual abuse is related to poor attachment to parents, which is associated with an inability to form intimate relationships. Seto and Lalumière indicated that there were too few studies of adolescent males to determine whether poor attachment was associated with perpetration. This study was designed to follow up on a previous study and further explored the association between insecure attachment to parents, social isolation, and interpersonal adequacy to child sexual abuse perpetration in adolescents. The authors compared two samples of adolescent males who had committed sexual offenses, those who committed offenses against children (n = 140) and those who committed offenses against peer or adults (n = 92), with a sample of similarly aged males in treatment for mental health or substance use issues (n = 93). Data were collected using a semi-structured interview and computer-administered questionnaire. The authors found an indirect association between anxious attachment and sexual offenses against child victims, which was accounted for by measures of social involvement and social isolation.

These involvement and isolation measures also did not have a direct association with sexual offenses against child victims, in that their contribution was accounted for by a measure of Masculine Adequacy. This Masculine Adequacy, combined with decreased levels of Sexual Preoccupation and Hypersexuality and increased Sexual Compulsivity, was associated with commission of child sexual abuse. The interpersonal variables did not enter a model predicting sexual offending against peers/adults, which seemed solely associated with the interaction between Sexual Compulsivity and Hypersexuality.

Citation

Miner, M.H., Romine, R., Robinson, B.E., Berg, D., & Knight, R.A. (2014). Anxious attachment, social isolation, and indicators of sex drive and compulsivity: Predictors of child sexual abuse perpetration in adolescent males. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. 1-22

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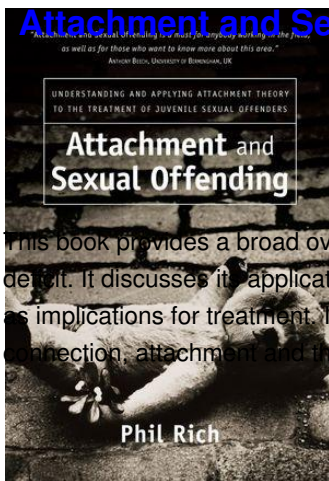
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