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Attachment styles among a sample of Estonian adult male offenders

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Abstract

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The link between offenders' attachment styles and bully-category, as well as violent offending has been assessed empirically in the present study. Estonian adult male (N = 110: 47 of them violent and 63 nonviolent) offenders were required to complete a measure of attachment, namely the Multiple-item Attachment Scale developed by Simpson (1990), and exploring secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent styles. Inmates in the high security prison were also required to complete a self-report behavioral checklist – Direct and Indirect Prisoner Behaviour Checklist-Revised (DIPC-R©: Ireland, 2002a), that enables inmates to categorize into four groups: pure bullies (N = 16), pure victims (N = 22), bully/victims (N = 47), and those not involved in bullying or victimization (N = 25). A significant difference was found regarding the bully-categories: (1) pure victims reported lower secure attachment scores than the other bully-categories; (2) bully/victims and pure victims reported higher anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than pure bullies and not involved offenders. Additionally, a significant difference was found regarding the violent versus non-violent offender status: violent offenders reported higher anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than non-violent inmates. The present study extends results to a sample of adult male prison inmates suggesting that offenders may share some common characteristics across different prison settings regarding insecure attachment styles as risk factors of prison bullying and violent criminal behavior.

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1. Introduction

Like many areas in psychological research, attachment theory has been applied in the forensic field (e.g. Pfäfflin, & Adshead, 2004), especially for two reasons – it provides the framework for a



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developmental perspective on aggressive (violent) behavior, and it helps better understand normal and distorted relationship formation in an interpersonal context (Ross, & Pfäfflin, 2004).

Empirically supported attachment theory reflects the nature of the parent-child bond across lifetime (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan, & Shaver, 1994). An important component of attachment theory is that individuals develop schemas or styles of attachment that continue throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969), classifying traditionally children's attachment quality into discrete categories – secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Attachment theory, as a developmental theory, offers a potentially useful conceptual framework for explaining bullying in different interpersonal contexts – dating relationships, homes, prisons, schools, residential homes, workplace (Coyne, & Monks, 2011). In the prison context, it has theorized (Ireland, 2002b) that there may be a link between inmates' attachment and prison bullying, with low genetic and attachment relationships representing one factor of the prison social environment that encourages potential exploitation between offenders.

Recent empirical study in the Norwegian prison (Hansen et al., 2011) had followed these ideas by exploring the role of male offenders' attachment styles and their personality in explaining convictions for violent crimes or aggression in their intimate relationships. In the English prisons, dealing with young and adult violent and nonviolent offenders' attachment styles and their prison bullying behavior, respondents were grouped into four bully-categories: pure bullies, pure victims, bully/victims and not involved. Comparing differences between study groups in terms of secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment it was revealed that bully/victims reported higher avoidant scores than the other bully-categories; with pure bullies and those not involved reporting lower avoidant scores (Ireland, & Power, 2004).

Bullying has been described as a subcategory of aggressive behavior that has its own particular (intended, repeated attack with power imbalance) characteristics, whereas in the prison context it is seen within the wider approach indicating that frequency, duration and intent as criteria for defining bullying may not always applied (Coyne, & Monks, 2011; Ireland, 2005). It also overlaps with the concept of violence if it includes physical aggression (Olweus, 1999). Bullying in prison is distinct from general measures of aggression (Ireland, & Archer, 2004; Palmer, & Thakordas, 2005).

It was concluded from meta-analysis that that insecure attachment was strongly associated with all types of criminality – domestic violence, non-violent offending, sexual offending, and violent offending. When comparing violent and non-violent offenders, small to medium effect sizes were observed with violent offenders more insecure in their attachments styles (Ogilvie, Newman, Todd, & Peck, 2014).

The focus of previous studies among adult male inmates in different countries was mainly comparing sexual offenders with violent offenders revealing that these two groups did not differ significantly in terms of insecure (anxious, avoidant) attachment styles: Abracen et al., (2006; Canadian prisons); Baker, & Beech (2004; English prisons); Hudson & Ward (1997; New Zealand prison); Marsa et al., (2004; Irish prisons); Stripe et al. (2006; Canadian prison); Ward, Hudson, & Marshall (1996; New Zealand prison). The violent offenders were also noted to be similar to the rapists in that they tended to be more dismissive/avoidant in their attachment styles (Stripe et al., 2006; Ward et al., 1996).

The link between adult prisoners' attachment styles and violent offending remains an under-researched area and had revealed mixed results. Ross & Pfäfflin (2007) compared German male adult violent offenders (sexual and nonsexual violent) with normal controls and found that violent offenders showed less secure attachment styles. Also, Italian adult male offenders who were convicted of violent crimes were classified as having insecure attachment styles (Schimmenti et al., 2014). Goldstein & Higgins-D'alessandro (2001) investigated the relationship between attachment styles in violent and non-violent incarcerated adult male and female offenders in America. At one side they found that attachment styles of both – the violent and non-violent, male offenders did not differ significantly from that of the control group. At the other side, it was revealed that both groups of female offenders (violent and non-violent) had higher scores on avoidant attachment than did the controls; and only the violent female offenders scored higher than the controls on anxious/avoidant current attachment. The authors suggest that the quality of the male offenders' attachment style does not seem to be a central determinant in their criminal behavior.

Thus, attachment styles have been related to criminal behavior, particularly violent offending, but there is only one study (in the UK: Ireland, & Power, 2004), to the authors' knowledge, exploring attachment styles among different groups of male offenders involved in prison bullying behavior; and few studies exploring attachment styles among male violent offenders (in Italy: Schimmenti et al., 2014) and comparing them with non-violent samples (in Germany: Ross, & Pfäfflin, 2007; in the USA: Goldstein, & Higgins-D'alessandro, 2001). The present study extends these results in Estonian prison setting suggesting that prison inmates may share some common characteristics across prison subcultures regarding their attachment styles.

This research addresses questions of whether or not Estonian male adult offenders who bully others and/or are victimized themselves can be distinguished by their current attachment styles; and as well as whether or not violent offenders and non-violent offenders can be distinguished by their current attachment styles.

The aims of the present study were to investigate differences in attachment styles: (1) among different groups of adult male offenders involved in bullying behavior (pure bully, pure victim, bully/victim, not involved); and (2) among violent and non-violent incarcerated adult male offenders in one of the high security prisons in Estonia.

It was predicted that there would be differences across the different bully-categories with bully/victims demonstrating higher insecure – avoidant, attachment styles than the other bully-category groups; and violent offenders would demonstrate lower secure attachment styles than non-violent offenders.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Adult male offenders (N = 110) from one prison in Estonia participated in this study. The prison housed only for men and was a high security institution. The mean age of imprisoned adult offenders was 32.8 years (SD = 9.1) (21 - 66 years old): 69% were of Estonian, 27% Russian, 4% mixed ethnic

origin. Their mean sentence length was 32.7 months, and the mean duration they had spent in penal institutions throughout their lives was 87.50 months. 43% (N = 47) were serving sentences for murder and other violent offences (physical assault, sexual assault, robbery, extortion, abduction, and arson); and 57% (N = 63) for non-violent offences (burglary, theft, drug offences, non-violent sex offences, vandalism, and vehicle-taking).

2.2. Instruments

Direct and Indirect Prisoner Behaviour Checklist-Revised Revised (DIPC-R©: Ireland, 2002a; author's permission) addressed to measure forms of bullying at prison. DIPC-R is a revised version of the DIPC (Ireland, 1999). Like the DIPC, it is a behavioral checklist that avoids use of the term bullying, instead presenting participants with a series of discrete behaviors indicative of either "bullying others" or of "being bullied." Items in the DIPC-R are separated into two sections. Section one identifies self-reported "victim" behaviors. Example of "victim" item is "I was hit or kicked by another prisoner". Section two identifies self-reported "bully" behaviors e.g. "I have deliberately started a fight" and "I have called someone names about their offence or charge". Participants are asked to indicate which behaviors have occurred to them in the past week and which they have engaged in.

The DIPC-R consists of 111 items, whereby 56 representing victim items 57 perpetration items and also "filler" items. The focus in the current study was on the victimization and perpetration items. Cronbach's alpha was .87 and .88 in the current sample for the victimization and perpetration scales, respectively.

Using the DIPC-R, prisoners can be classified into one of four categories: "pure bully", "bully/victim", "pure victim", and "not involved". Prisoners reporting at least one incident of bullying others but no incident of victimization are classified as "pure bullies". Those who report at least one incident of bullying others and at least one of victimization are classified as "bully/victims". Those who report at least one incident of victimization and no incident of bullying others are classified as "pure victims". Participants are classified as "not involved" if they report no incident of bullying others or being victimized. The approach to separating participants into one of these four groups is a commonly used method of examining the DIPC-R (e.g. Ireland & Ireland, 2008; Ireland & Power, 2013).

Multiple-item Attachment Scale, developed by Simpson (1990), was used to define in terms of present reports of attachment styles. This measure based directly on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment measure indicating three paragraphs corresponding to the three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent. The participants were asked to rate 13 sentences: five items for secure (e.g., "I find it relatively easy to get close to others"), and four items for avoidant (e.g., "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others") and anxious/ambivalent ("I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like") attachment style on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). To measure each attachment style, the items corresponding to three paragraphs aggregated to form three attachment subscales, whereby higher scores reflected greater security, avoidance, or anxious/ambivalent attachment style.

Each subscale of the Multiple-item Attachment Scale was assessed and the “secure” subscale demonstrated adequate reliability for a scale comprising of five items, with an alpha coefficient of .59; the “avoidance” subscale (four items) with an alpha coefficient value of .62; and the “anxious/ambivalent” subscale (four items) with a standardized alpha coefficient of .77. Item-to-total correlations were all positive.

2.3. Procedure

All inmates who were available at the time of sampling received both oral and written information about the purpose of the study and were invited to participate voluntarily in the research. Inmates who agreed to participate were brought to a quiet classroom, without the presence of any staff in order to guarantee the confidentiality of each prisoner. The author as a researcher remained in the room during data collection to answer any questions and provide help for participants who had reading and writing difficulties. The questionnaires were administered individually or in small groups of two or three, with respondents seated in available rooms, at separate corners, facing away from each other. Participants were informed in writing and verbally about the purpose of the research, issues of confidentiality and the option to withdraw from the research at any stage. Inmates were informed verbally that the study was voluntary, that participation was anonymous and that the outcome of the assessments would not be used in any way by the prison authorities. They were asked individually to read the preceding information contained on a coversheet, including a description of the research, and an explanation of its purpose. The coversheet included a statement informing inmates that no one but the researcher would see their individual responses and that no one would come back to them to ask them about what they had written. Each respondent was provided with unmarked sealable envelope in which to place their completed questionnaire. All subjects completed all measures and there were no non-completed questionnaires. Each questioning lasted approximately 45 minutes varying from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. From all inmates who were available at the time of sampling 32% prisoners volunteered to participate in this research. Permission for the research was obtained from the appropriate ministry and was consulted with the administrators of correctional facility.

3. Results

Bully-categories

On the basis of the DIPC-R, 16 of the 110 participants (14%) were classified as “pure bullies”, 22 (20%) as “pure victims”, 47 (43%) as “bully/victims”, and 25 (23%) as “not involved”.

Attachment styles

The mean scores on the attachment measure were displayed across bully-categories (pure bully, pure victim, bully/victim, not involved; Table 1), and across offender status groups (violent vs. non-violent; Table 2), whereby the higher scores were associated with an increased tendency to demonstrate each attachment style. Several separate one-way analyses of variance were conducted using group membership as the independent variable and ratings on the attachment styles as the dependent variables

across bully-categories and offender status for total scores on the subscales of the Multiple-item Attachment Scale (Table 2, 3).

Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations for bully-categories on the Multiple-item Attachment Scale

Attachment style		Pure bully N = 16	Bully/victim N = 47	Pure victim N = 22	Not involved N = 25	Overall N = 110
Secure	Mean	4.30	4.23	3.20	3.88	3.96
	(SD)	(2.19)	(2.23)	(2.20)	(2.12)	(2.23)
Avoidant	Mean	3.73	4.24	4.18	4.18	4.14
	(SD)	(2.35)	(2.36)	(2.43)	(2.27)	(2.35)
Anxious/ambivalent	Mean	3.20	4.14	4.07	3.25	3.78
	(SD)	(2.18)	(2.20)	(2.24)	(2.29)	(2.26)

Table 2. Mean scores, standard deviations, *F* and *p*-values for violent offenders and non-violent offenders on the Multiple-item Attachment Scale

Attachment style		Violent offenders N = 47	Non-violent offenders N = 63	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Secure	Mean	4.00	3.92	0.18	0.67
	(SD)	(2.29)	(2.18)		
Avoidant	Mean	4.28	4.04	1.09	0.29
	(SD)	(2.42)	(2.30)		
Anxious/ambivalent	Mean	4.06	3.58	5.08	0.02
	(SD)	(2.33)	(2.18)		

Table 3. *F*-values and *p* values comparing different victim-categories on the Multiple-item Attachment Scale

Attachment style	<i>F</i> / <i>p</i> value	Bully versus bully/victim	Bully versus victim	Bully versus not involved	Bully/victim versus victim	Bully/victim versus not involved	Victim versus not involved
Secure	<i>F</i>	0.05	11.62	1.79	16.28	2.04	5.94
	<i>p</i>	0.82	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.15	0.02
Avoidant	<i>F</i>	2.19	1.29	1.46	0.03	0.04	0.05
	<i>p</i>	0.14	0.26	0.23	0.86	0.84	0.84
Anxious/ambivalent	<i>F</i>	8.66	5.50	0.02	0.08	10.35	5.93
	<i>p</i>	0.00	0.02	0.89	0.78	0.00	0.02

The results indicated that there were several statistically significant differences with regards to offenders' current attachment styles and their bullying status groups (Table 3). A significant difference was found regarding the bully-categories: (1) pure victims reported lower secure attachment scores than the other bully-categories; (2) bully/victims and pure victims reported higher anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than pure bullies and not involved participants. There were no significant differences between four study groups concerning with reported avoidant attachment scores.

When comparing prison inmates convicted of crimes of violence with inmates convicted of non-violent crimes, no differences were found in their ratings of secure and avoidant attachment. A significant difference was found regarding the violent versus non-violent offender status: violent offenders reported higher anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than non-violent offenders (Table 2).

4. Conclusion

Attachment theory provides a fruitful theoretical background in the forensic field to concentrate empirically on issues how offenders' attachment styles are related to prison bullying, as well as violent offending. This theory lays the groundwork for the first hypothesis of the present study that there

would be differences across the different bully-categories with bully/victims demonstrating higher insecure – avoidant, attachment styles than the other bully-category groups. Consistent with the prediction was the finding that there were differences between the bully-categories with bully/victims demonstrating higher insecure attachment. This only held with regards to anxious/avoidant attachment, however, with bully/victims and pure victims reporting higher anxious/avoidant attachment scores than pure bullies and those not involved.

The findings regarding adult male bully/victims are partially consistent with those of Ireland & Power (2004) reported in the English prisons that young and adult male bully/victims revealed higher insecure – avoidant, attachment scores than pure bullies and those not involved. However, the current findings are not consistent in terms of concrete insecure attachment styles with the first prediction, but generally supported the tendency for bully/victims to have distortions in secure attachment quality – in the present study dominant anxious/ambivalent; and in the previously mentioned study avoidant attachment style. In general line, these findings are parallel with those of Troy & Sroufe (1987) found among children that avoidant attachment style revealed more likely among bullies and ambivalent attachment styles among victims of bullying.

Although, Ireland & Power (2004) hypothesized, but not found a support to the conjecture, that victims of prison bullying have insecure attachment style. Our research showed that both groups – bully/victims and victims, demonstrated a tendency towards having anxious/ambivalent attachment styles. The present finding that victims of bullying demonstrated more distortions in attachment quality – namely, lower secure attachment styles compared with other bully-categories, was not improved in the English prison setting (Ireland, & Power, 2004), but is parallel with results in schoolbullying context where victims demonstrated higher levels of insecure attachment than bullies and not involved adolescents (Kõiv, 2012).

Secondly, it was predicted that adult male violent offenders would demonstrate lower secure attachment styles than non-violent offenders. This hypothesis was partially supported. Consistent with the prediction was the finding that there were differences between male adult offenders' status groups with violent offenders demonstrating higher insecure attachment. This only held with regards to anxious/avoidant attachment, however, with violent inmates reporting higher scores than non-violent offenders. This current finding is consistent with previous studies in the German (Ross, & Pfäffin, 2007) and in the Italian (Schimmenti et al, 2014) prisons demonstrating insecure attachment styles among violent male offenders, but not consistent with results in the Norwegian (Hansen et al., 2011) and in the USA (Goldstein, & Higgins-D'alessandro, 2001) prisons indicating that male adult offenders' attachment did not predict convictions for violence. Parallel, with our results is finding (Goldstein, & Higgins-D'alessandro, 2001) that female violent offenders scored significantly higher on anxious attachment than did the control.

Overall, the current study provides evidence that there is a link between male adult offenders' insecure attachment, especially anxious/avoidant, and both the experiences of involvement in bully-victim behavior and violent criminal behavior. The extent to which offenders' attachment style encourages prison bullying and violent offending or is a consequence developed from this remains unclear.

It is reasonable to speculate that bully/victims and violent offenders may share vulnerability towards an anxious/ambivalent attachment style and victims of prison bullying also experience additional risk factors connected with increasing levels of insecure attachment.

One noteworthy aspect of the present study is that the data interpretation was taken from different prison contexts based on previous studies by suggesting that prison inmates may share some common characteristics regarding attachment styles. Some possible limitations of this study deserve mentioning. First of all, it should be acknowledged that the results from this relatively small sample of male prison inmates are not necessarily generalizable to other age groups, or across gender, and should therefore be interpreted with caution. This limitation reduced our possibility to take into account other potentially confounding variables (i.e., number of past offenses, length of criminal career) which may have affected our results. Secondly, the issue of the voluntary nature of the design and data collection of the present study, which biases the sample probably toward individuals who seek attention and approval making them more prone to comply when asked to complete a questionnaire in the closed institution setting. Thirdly, the study employed a relatively crude measure of general attachment styles and these ratings may have less predictive power without reference to specific relationship.

The present study adds to our knowledge and identification of potential risk factors in the vulnerability to prison bullying and violent offending that could be used in forensic settings in connection with developing treatment programs targeting incarcerated offenders' attachment styles and broadening new avenues for evidence-based studies.

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