How the Lack of Secure Attachments Cultivates Psychopathic Traits

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Introduction

The construction of a psychopath is based on the underpinning of lack of attachment with caregivers. The formation of secure attachment seems to be essential for pro-social interactions. Insufficient secure attachment foundation and certain neurological predispositions appear to be the factors of psychopathic personality disorder. The formation of secure attachment is biologically grounded, behavioral distinct mechanism that serves the viability of the child by sustaining the immediacy of the caregiver. The concept of attachment is often described as a formidable emotional bond between the child and adult. Psychological research is entrenched in this area of the importance of secure attachment. Psychologists have reported for nearly seventy years on how critical aspects of forming a secure attachment is to the biopsychosocial development of the child. However, the link between traumatic life experiences, such as abuse and neglect (lack of secure attachment) and psychopathy may be lacking from the psychological literature. The formation of a secure attachment seems to be the core for self-esteem, confidence, prosocial interaction, and security for the developing child. The undeniable bond that the caregiver will be prepared to protect the child is imperative for social development.

In this proposed study, the researcher will use psychological literature to justify the importance of the research through a qualitative approach. The researcher will describe the population of interest as a clarification to the research question as it is discovered. The researcher will discuss the details of the methodology, approach, and how these strategies for the sample being studied to catalyze generalization to the target population. The researcher will discuss the strengths and limitations of the proposed study based on psychological literature. The aspirations of this proposed study is to first create an awareness of the importance of a nurturing
environment for children and how it will aid in the transition to adolescence and adulthood.

Second, the researcher wants to establish evidence that secure attachment formation could be the primary key in the prevention of the cultivation of psychopathy.

Exploring the Research Problem

When investigating the research problem of the lack of secure attachment and how it impacts the cultivation of psychopathic traits it is essential to understand how early abuse and neglect can be conjecturers to development, behavior, and health issues with the child, and the possibility of it persisting into adolescence and adulthood and across generations. Joseph, O’Connor, Briskman, Maughan, and Scott (2013) noted three essential questions that were paramount in the understanding of the impact of early destructive care:

1. How does abuse/neglect experienced by adolescents impact future secure attachment relationships with other caregivers (foster parents)?
2. What factor predicts the development of secure attachment with foster parents among adolescents who have endured early abuse/neglect?
3. Is a secure attachment linked with fewer felonious and antisocial indicators among adolescents in foster care?

The researchers concluded that poor early child care increased the possibility of successive delinquent behaviors and mental and somatic health issues with continuous effects across time and generations. However, if the foster parents can provide a steadfast, supportive relationship, it could alter the development of psychopathic behavior trajectory of the child who endured poor early child care. The critical issue appears to be the quality of the parent-adolescent interaction. Joseph et al. (2013) evaluated this formation of this relationship by using observational measures of the parent and adolescent interacting on three tasks (planning task,
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problem-solving task, and building task). It would appear that early environmental factors are critical in the development of a secure attachment. However, if this secure attachment is not formed the development of psychopathic traits are possible. If foster caregivers can build trust during the adolescent years, the resurgent of the secure attachment could limit disruptive behavior symptoms. It is understood that there could be neurological predispositions associated with psychopathy, but the accelerant could be based on the quality of the secure attachment. This proposed study will examine the essential aspects of secure attachment.

**Research Proposal Question: How does the lack of Secure Attachment Cultivate Psychopathic Tendencies?**

The research question in this proposal is relevant to social development, which begins with the relationship between the child and their parents. Psychopathic traits involve a mixture of characteristics that are cultivated in early development by the quality of formation or lack of configuration of a secure attachment with caregivers. Disruptions of this significant development event could affect the blooming of empathy and emotional stability, which are foundations of lasting interpersonal, operational models about self-concepts and others. Dadds et al. (2015) noted the correlation between callous-unemotional traits and the lack of secure attachment (low degrees of empathy and the capability to regulate emotions). The phenomenon of psychopathy is an unusual event due to its multiple behavioral traits the individual could be someone who manipulates others with lies by stealing, cheating or lack of remorse for the people they have wronged. The psychopath may be aggressive physically injuring others or committing heinous violent acts without regret. It is possible that this phenomenon has remained fascinating to society due to its component of evil and the individuals who are thought to embody that evil.
There has been considerable publication investigating psychopathy in the criminal population to produce a better comprehension of the anatomy and risk components associated with these atypical behaviors. In most cases, people think of psychopaths as a killer, rapists, or heinous criminals. However, there seems to be differing aspects and nature related to this disturbance.

Schimmenti et al. (2014) conducted a study examining the relationship connecting attachments and psychopathy with a sample of violent offenders. The researchers noted that attachment involves the ability to form secure bonds motivated by affection and love toward each other. The child expects the parent or caregiver to be there to love them and keep them safe. This attachment allows the child to explore and form schemes about the world and the building of a viewpoint that their world is safe. The formation of the secure attachment may be an evolutionary mechanism designed to increase the child’s chances for survival. The proposed study will examine the secure attachment function of establishing these attributes and how it helps the immature brain organize cognitive processes and behaviors motivated by social interactions from parents/caregivers. There are three primary classifications of attachment styles:

- **Secure attachment** - the child feels protected by the parent or caregiver, and they know they can count on the parent or caregiver to love them
- **Anxious attachment** - desires intimacy, worries about the parent or caregiver ability to love them back
- **Avoidant attachment** - avoids getting emotionally attached to people or situation

Schimmenti et al. (2014) suggested that the adolescent or adults who are securely attached could enjoy intimacy and close relationship; this person can share their feelings and seek support when needed. However, expressing anxious attachment desire for devotion and intimacy can cause the person to worry that the other person will not reciprocate their love.
Avoidant attachment is not interested in devoted relationships and is often unwilling or unable to share their feelings with others. The researchers implied that some of the people who were exposed to abuse in their childhood could also exhibit disorganized or dual attachment (anxious and avoidant attachment together). Schimmenti et al. (2014) concluded that the investigation of past and present attachment relationships could be pivotal for the apprehension of psychopathy.

Research Population of Interest

Most psychological research involves a specific group of interest, and from that group, attempts are made to produce generalizations from that group to the population. The population of interest in this proposed study will consist of a group of twenty inmates ages 20 to 55 who were incarcerated for violent crimes (rape, murder, and child sexual abuse). The inmates participating in this study will be voluntary and informed consent will be obtained. It may be necessary to use a traumatic experience checklist and a psychopathy checklist to evaluate childhood related trauma and psychopathy. However, most of these instruments are quantitative in design. These tools may be converted into open-ended interview questions to allow the participants to tell their story as they experienced the event with limited interruptions by the psychologist.

Craparo, Schimmenti, and Caretti (2013) noted a link between early traumatic events (lack of secure attachment) and criminal behavior. However, there is limited knowledge about the relationship between the lack of secure attachment and the development of psychopathy. The researchers suggested that psychopathy is a complicated personality disorder characterized by emotional deficiencies, which involve a lack of care for social norms, empathy, and remorse. The researchers conducted interviews with twenty-two violent inmates ages 20-60 to evaluate psychopathic personality traits and how traumatic abuse/neglect contributed to the development
of psychopathic traits. Craparo et al. (2013) concluded that early exposure to lack of secure attachments associated with abuse or neglect played a pertinent role in the development of severe psychopathic characteristics. Some of the interview questions consisted of topics such as the relationship with parents, physical, sexual, emotional abuses, and adult relationship formation.

Selection of Participants

The participants in this proposed study will be introduced to the study first by explaining its purpose, and that data would be collected according to strict procedures to protect confidentiality. The participants will have to sign an informed consent document prior to the start of the study. It may be essential to explain to the inmates no legal or substantial benefits for their participation would be granted. The interview would take place in a room to guarantee privacy. However, for security, a guard would be posted outside the room.

Schimmenti et al. (2014) employed similar procedures in their study of the relationship between attachment formation and psychopathy. The researchers interviewed 139 offenders and determined that past and current attachments associations can be instrumental in the production of psychopathic traits. The process used to select the participants for this proposed study supports the guidelines for the methodology connected with narrative analysis in psychology and is supported by psychological literature. The process proposed in this study is based on studies that were approved by internal review boards of both prison institutions.

Methodology

The narrative study approach should prove productive in this proposed study. Willig (2013) suggested that a narrative psychological approach is a method that involves concentration on human interactions. Using the narrative psychological approach will allow for an understanding of how the impact of secure attachment on the participants’ outcome and its
connection to psychopathic tendencies. The narrative approach should allow the participants to
tell their story of relationships with parents or caregivers and its connection with psychopathic
personality traits. The participants can tell their stories as they re-live pivotal events in their
lives.

Porter and Woodworth (2007) used a narrative approach in part of their study on
homicide description of psychopaths and non-psychopaths offenders. The researchers examined
the violent acts of psychopaths and non-psychopaths as the participants told their stories. The
researchers used the Step-Wise interview process, which allowed the participants to use free
recall with little to no interruption as they when into details about their lives and crimes they
committed. The interviewers would encourage the participants to start at the beginning and leave
nothing out. After the free narrative approach, the researchers would ask open-ended questions to
allow the participants to clarify details and elaborate.

The narrative approach is a perspective designed to gain insight into a personal
experience of certain situations. The participants will be able to elaborate on childhood
experiences and speculate on how they believe these experiences have contributed to their
psychopathic behaviors. This process could provide useful data to understand better the evil
connected with psychopathy through an eyewitness storyline. The information obtained in this
proposed narrative study could lead to further studies where victims of psychopathic oriented
crimes could share their stories of traumatic life events.

**The Role of the Researcher in this Proposed Study**

Sutton and Austin (2015) conducted a study on qualitative research approach. The
researchers noted principles associated with the collection, analysis, and management of
qualitative information. Qualitative research can assist the researcher in understanding the
thoughts and feelings of the participants based on the design of the study. Regardless of the research design, the method of data collection should involve the production of large quantities of data in some cases.

During the interview phase of this proposed study, the collection of data could be fieldnotes or video/audio recordings. Onuoha (2019) suggested that NVivo 11 software can be utilized in the storage of data collected in interviews and with the interpretation of that data. However, a combination of field notes and video recording devices can be adequate in the collection of data. The NVivo 11 can be very productive in organizing unstructured text, which might be in abundance with a narrative research approach. The NVivo 11 will be essential in coding the interview data. This area will be a weakness for the researcher due to the lack of experience with NVivo software. However, Sutton and Austin (2015) recommended taking formal courses available to develop skills in the utilization of the software. The proper management of the data should aid in the interpretation of the information. However, with the uses of technology, it would be necessary to take fieldnotes and video record the interview process as the participants tell their story. The video recording will help in the evaluation of body language.

The data analysis and management procedures should provide the evidence that answers the research question. Using the psychological narrative approach should provide the catalyst to understand the research problem. The narrative approach should provide the method to access the participants’ thoughts and feelings as they tell their story. The open-ended questions (see Appendix 1), should allow for the participants to express their views in clear details connected to the lack of secure attachment and psychopathic behaviors. The narrative approach is designed to allow the participant to tell their story with little to no interruption. However, open-ended
questions were formed to get the participants started and to ensure clear details are provided. The first interview session will involve discussions on the quality of attachments that were formed by the participant in childhood and later in adulthood. Carver (2013) noted that the Measure of Attachment qualities is designed to evaluate adult attachment patterns. This device will be used in this proposed study to create open-ended questions to better understand anxious-ambivalent patterns (anxiety and neuroticism) in the quality of the attachment behaviors of the participants. In the second phase of interviews, the discussion will be focused on the psychopathic tendencies of the participants. Paulhus (2013) introduced the Comprehensive Misconduct Inventory, which evaluates the connection between psychopathy and self-reported misconduct. The instrument provides questions in five clusters: criminal behavior, driving misconduct, bullying, alcohol/drug abuse, and anti-authority aggression. These questions will be used to develop open-ended questions to assist in guiding the interview in the narrative approach with the participants. These questions can be located in the appendix of this study proposal.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the proposed study**

Stephens and Breheny (2013) suggested in their study of narrative analysis of psychological studies that narrative analysis is an open approach to explicating stories. The researchers noted a strength of narrative analysis approach is a prevalent structure by which we understand and convey the experience and meanings of situations, accounts for our own and others’ behaviors, and express ourselves to others in a way we would like to be viewed. This process can add to the knowledge base of secure attachment and psychopathy by developing an understanding of the perception of the individual based on their interpretation of the events in their lives as they re-live them. The researcher, by using the narrative analysis learns something of the participant’s interpretation of their structure and status in the social world. This feature can
fill a gap on the nurture side of the psychopathic phenomenon. This method provides essential information about the participant’s experiences in association with identity and social life.

Eastoe, Haire, and Rees (2019) noted that narrative analysis enables the researcher to observe how the participants impose their order on life events and situations by reflecting on their relationships between activities and behaviors through a story-line. The narrative analysis assists the researcher to describe the intermediate stages leading to a given event and to establish similarities and variations between individuals. This factor contributes to the key aspects of the study proposal’s design and analysis. Another fundamental aspect of the narrative analysis is how it enables the researcher to gain a rich comprehending, holistic, and powerful view of the topic being studied.

Eastoe et al. (2019) suggested that narrative analysis is limited due to the sample group is usually small. This study has twenty participants and would be considered modest in terms of other research procedures. This aspect of the proposed study is due to the history of the data that suggests that only one percent of the population having psychopathic tendencies. The federal corrections systems suggested that twenty-five percent of its male population are psychopaths (Parry, 2011). Another weakness of the narrative analysis design that will be used in this proposed study is the complicated viewpoints of the participants and the detail that is needed to understand the subtleties of the data being collected. The collection and analysis can produce interpretation distortion by subjectivity. To improve these limitations before the study starts could be to ensure focus and detail in the interview process (guidelines). Establishing open-ended questions should provide focus and direction to allow the participants to elaborate on the details in their stories in a clear and precise manner with few interruptions. Subject manipulation should be minimal, which should provide a clear first-person account. An essential area that the
researcher cannot change and will have very little control is the information that the participants provided in their stories, and how that information can be generalized to a target audience. Since the researcher will be working with psychopaths, manipulation could be an issue. This dilemma is a weakness in the study that cannot be improved upon. However, this could be documented and discussed in this proposed study (Eastoe et al., 2019).

**Conclusion**

Psychopathy is a distinctive personality disorder that is characterized by interpersonal dysfunctions. Most of the research in psychopathy begins with brain abnormalities. However, there is a gap in the research concerning the impact of attachment formations with parents/caregivers. This proposed study examines the relationship between adverse external factors and the cultivation of antisocial components of psychopathy. The quality of secure attachment influence the ability to effectively interact with others. If the secure attachment is not formed this proposed study suggests that this is an essential variable to the cultivation of psychopathy.

The investigation is documented by psychological literature which suggested that attachment experiences impact psychopathic tendencies. Insecure and disorganized attachments seem to be very common among psychopathic offenders. Results from the qualitative analysis reviewed inferred clear evidence with psychopathic offenders showed avoidance, insecure, and disorganized attachment styles throughout their lives.
Appendix 1

Secure Attachment Open-Ended Questions:
1. Describe your relationship with your parents/caregivers.
2. Describe how close you are to others.
3. How does it make you feel when others ask you to open up to them?
4. Describe your sense of loyalty to others.
5. When you think about your parents/caregivers, what thoughts come to mind?

Psychopathic Tendency Open-Ended Questions:
1. In your high school years, how did it make you feel to take advantage of someone? Did you feel any remorse?
2. Describe how it made you feel to physically or psychologically hurt someone.
3. If you saw someone crying how would that make you feel?
4. Explain a time in your life when you made someone feel guilty to give in to your desires?
5. Specify a time in your life where you did something you felt like doing knowing it was illegal?

- Note. These question may not be used directly, but are safeguards to keep the participants on topic. The sample group will be psychopaths and may exhibit control issues in the interview. These questions will maintain order in the process. The narrative analysis process allows for the participants to tell their story as they experienced it. However, the researcher must remember who is providing the information. If the participant stays on the topic, then there will be limited interruptions and the questions may not be necessary.

References


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