The Center for Fostering Success

Best Practice, Best Fit

Webinar Series

Discovery Driven Solutions Related to Educational Attainment for Students from Foster Care
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• Attendees in listen only mode.
• Ask questions using the chat or questions feature.
• Technical difficulties? Contact Citrix team at 1-888-259-8414
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THANK YOU!

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The Role of Attachment Style in College Persistence and Completion for Foster Care Youth

Nathanael Okpych, PhD
Assistant Professor, UConn School of SW
Project Director, CalYOUTH Study
100
17-year-olds in foster care

84
Aspire to go to college

40
Enroll in college by age 25/26

8
Earn 2yr/4yr degree by age 25/26

Sources: Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Courtney et al., 2011
College completion rates by age 25/26

8 %
Foster Youth
(Midwest Study)

46 %
U.S. Youth
(Add Health Study)

Source: Courtney et al., 2011
Barriers to College Completion

Barriers Suggested by Research¹

- Academically underprepared
  - Past school quality, education disruptions
  - Need for remediation in college
- Precarious financial situation
- Limited social capital (e.g., navigating college, emotional support)
- Other life demands (child care, work, etc.)
- Mental health/substance use issues
- While in college, FC services/support phase out

Less Visible Barriers

- Possible lasting psychosocial effects of loss and trauma¹
  - These issues affect youth’s likelihood of seeking/using help, even when it’s available

¹ e.g., Courtney et al., 2011; Okpych, 2012; Pecora, 2012; Salazar et al., 2016;  
² Norton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008
Adult Attachment Styles

• Several qualitative studies of foster youth describe the adoption of a self-protective stance in response to trauma and ruptured relationships\(^1\)

• Exemplify what developmental psychologists call “avoidant attachment” style

\(^1\) Kools, 1999; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; Morton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008
Adult Attachment Styles

• Attachment theory in childhood\(^1\)
  – Durable patterns of relationship expectations, emotions, and behaviors formed from early infant-caregiver interactions

• Attachment styles generally stable over time, but can be influenced by experiences later in life:
  “They can be altered by powerful experiences that affect a person’s beliefs about the value of seeking help from attachment figures and the feasibility of attaining safety, protection, and comfort” (Mikulincer et al., p.85).

• Severe maltreatment and relational instability in foster care (e.g., frequent placement changes) exemplify such “powerful experiences” that can shake one’s sense of safety, stability, and basic trust in relationships

\(^1\) Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1973
Adult Attachment Styles

• Adult attachment styles measured on two dimensions:
  – **Anxious**—concern that relationships with others will be severed
  – **Avoidant**—preoccupation with maintaining distance from others

• Low on both dimensions—secure attachment style

• Several qualitative studies with foster care youth exemplify “avoidant attachment”

• Avoidant attachment characterized by a tendency to
  ➢ Avoid intimacy and emotional closeness
  ➢ Minimize dependence on others by being highly self-reliant
  ➢ Downplay threats
  ➢ Suppress acknowledgement of personal faults and shortcomings

1 Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1973
Connecting the Dots: Avoidant Attachment and College Persistence

- Most foster youth enter college in precarious situation
- Connections to resourceful adults and peers at college will be instrumental to their success
- Avoidant attachment can compromise youth’s social support

Excessive relational trauma → Higher avoidant attachment → Smaller social networks → Don’t use available support → More likely to drop out when problems arise
Current Study: Questions

1. Does past relational trauma (school changes, foster care placement changes) predict higher avoidant attachment?

2. Does higher avoidant attachment decrease odds of college persistence? Of graduating?

3. Is the relationship between avoidant attachment and college outcomes mediated (explained) by amount of social support youth have around the time they’re in college?
Data and Analyses

Midwest Study
• 2002 – 2011 (five waves)
• Wave 1: 732 adolescents (age 17) in foster care 6+ months in IA, IL, WI
• College outcomes: National Student Clearinghouse data (2015), cross-checked with self-report from MWS

Samples
• Persistence: 331 youth in NSC data
• Degree completion: 329 youth who could be observed for at least 6 years

Analyses
• Avoidant attachment & other controls (age 17) to predict college outcomes
  – Controls: demographics, education history, behavior problems, behavioral health, & maltreatment/foster care history, college selectivity
  – Mediator: social support at MWS interview closest to when youth entered college
  – Outcomes: persisted for first 3 consecutive semesters, completed 2yr/4yr degree
• Logistic regression
• Multiple imputation to address missing data
Avoidant Attachment Measure

• Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)
  – 36 items (18 for avoidance, 18 for anxious)

• ECR-R modifications in MWS
  – Shortened (11 items each dimension)
  – Asked about relationships in general, not romantic relationships

• Avoidant attachment (11 items, measured age 17/18)
  – E.g., I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down
  – E.g., I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others
  – Response options on seven point Likert scale: 1=Strongly disagree to 7=Strongly agree
  – Chronbach’s alpha = .77 (good internal consistency)
Findings
Outcomes among Youth in College

- Persistence (n=331): 33%
- Completion (n=329): 24%
Avoidant Attachment

Figure 1. Distribution of Avoidant Attachment Scores (n = 726)

Mean = 3.58
SD = 1.02
Past Maltreatment and Avoidant Attachment

Figure 2. Average Avoidant Attachment Scores for Different Amounts of Maltreatment, by Maltreatment Type (n = 732)
Past Maltreatment and Relational Instability

Figure 3. Average Avoidant Attachment Score by Number of School Changes (n = 732)

Figure 4. Average Avoidant Attachment Score by Number of Foster Care Placements (n = 732)
Avoidant Attachment and College Outcomes

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Educational history: Highest completed grade, Reading score, Grade repetition, Special Education, Expulsion, Number of college prep activities, College aspirations
Behavioral problems: Delinquency score, Ever in congregate care
Behavioral health: Mental health problems, Alcohol/substance use problems
Foster care history: Number of foster care placements, Number of school changes, Maltreatment tertiles
Institutional factor: College type/selectivity

Interpretation: For each 1-point increase in AA on the 7-point scale, the expected odds of persistence decreases by 29%. (1-.71=.29)

Simpler Interpretation: Youth higher in AA are less likely to persist than youth lower in AA.
## Avoidant Attachment and College Outcomes

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Avoidant Attachment and College Outcomes

- Hypothetical example to demonstrate probability of persisting through first 3 semesters

**Average AA**
Probability of persisting: 33%

**1 SD higher on AA**
Probability of persisting: 27%
Summary

• Youth who experienced more maltreatment and instability had higher levels of avoidant attachment at age 17/18

• In turn, higher levels of avoidant attachment decreased odds of persistence and degree completion
  – Net of many other factors
  – Note: not presented here – Anxious Attachment not significantly related to college outcomes

• Relationship between avoidant attachment and college outcomes explained in part by social support
Limitations

• Attachment style measure
  – Some items omitted from scale
  – Measured at age 17/18, not before entering college

• Social support (mediator)
  – Broadly measured (perceived availability)
  – Did not capture suspected mechanisms—social network size, use of available supports

• Findings generalize across time and region?
Implications

• Attachment style appears to be one piece of the pie in influencing college outcomes
  – Important, because available resources/supports only work if youth use them

• May need to address attachment issues as part of intervention with foster youth
  – Treat underlying trauma
  – Normalize help-seeking
  – Opportunities to develop connections to resourceful adults and peers

• Research: more detail about potential mechanisms
Thank you.

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