Adolescent Parental Attachment and Links With Concurrent Risky Behavior Profiles

Nazly Hasanizadeh*, Margaret Tresch Owen*, Margaret O’ Brien Caughy**

*The University of Texas at Dallas, **University of Texas School of Public Health

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**Introduction**

Although a shift toward greater autonomy takes place during adolescence, the parent-child relationship continues to play a crucial role in the adolescent’s competencies (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Research suggests that adolescent attachment with parents is an important predictor of adolescent engagement in risky behavior (Booth, Farrell, and Varano, 2008).

Little is known about whether or how risky behavior may be organized in adolescence and whether different typologies or profiles of risk taking behaviors may exist. Research suggests that the organization of risk behaviors in adolescence typically involves engagement with multiple risky behaviors (Elliott, 1992;; Jessor & Jessor, 1977;; Jessor, 1992;; Osgood, 1991), but the existence of distinct groupings or patterns of risk taking behavior has not been explored. This study examined profiles of risky behavior and associations with parental attachment classifications.

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**Method**

**Participants**
- Derived from phase 4 of the NICHD SECCYD, when participants were 15 years old.
- 906 adolescents
  - 51% Boys, 49% Girls
  - 81% White/ European American, 19% non-White/ Other

**Attachment Measure:**

**Risky Behavior Measure:**
- The Risky Behavior Questionnaire (Conger & Elder, 1994; Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp, & Tschann, 2005). 61 items total: 8 sub-types of risky behavior.

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**Results**

**4-Class Latent Class Model of Attachment**

**2-Class Latent Class Model of Risky Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Group</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Secure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissive</td>
<td>16.02*</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td>2.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Less Secure</td>
<td>2.676</td>
<td>1.053</td>
<td>.986ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>5.764*</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>1.752ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slightly Less Secure</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>5.98*</td>
<td>.584</td>
<td>1.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Secure</td>
<td>.374</td>
<td>1.053</td>
<td>-.985ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>2.15*</td>
<td>.361</td>
<td>.767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Odds ratios adjusted for gender, ethnicity, and income.

**Conclusion**

Results indicate a lack of evidence for further distinctions of groupings of risky behavior at this age in adolescence. Relatively few adolescents reported high rates of risky behavior, therefore different types of risky behavior clusters were not discernable. However, there was generally less engagement in risky behavior when adolescents reported having a secure attachment with their parents. Is secure attachment a protective factor?

**Limitations**

- This is primarily a low-risk sample with regards to prevalence rates of risky behavior.
- The relative lack of ethnic minorities limits generalizability.
- Both of the measures relied on self report, thus findings could be partially due to shared method variance.
- The Directionality is unknown: Does parental attachment influence engagement in risky behavior? Or does involvement in risky behavior undermine secure parental attachments?