



THE ROLE OF ATTACHMENT STYLE ON ADOLESCENT RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

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BACKGROUND

- Insecure attachment in adolescents is often linked to risky sexual behavior (i.e. behavior that increases one's chances of contracting sexually transmitted infections or experiencing unintended pregnancies; [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010](#)).
- Evidence suggests that adolescents with an avoidant attachment style tend to display less risky sexual behavior than those with a secure attachment style, due to avoidant adolescents' general discomfort with intimacy ([Tracy et al., 2001](#)). Some research indicates that attachment anxiety is associated with riskier sexual behavior ([Tracy et al., 2001](#); [Potard et al., 2014](#)).
- Little research exists on the effect of gender on the association between attachment anxiety and risky sexual behavior in adolescents, while even less exists on attachment avoidance and risky sexual behavior.
- The current study examines the associations between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and risky sexual behavior, while also examining gender as a moderator.
- **We hypothesize** that in adolescents, attachment anxiety will predict riskier sexual behavior, and this effect will be stronger in girls as opposed to boys. We also hypothesize that an avoidant attachment style will predict less risky sexual behavior, and this effect will be stronger for girls than boys.

METHOD

- Participants (N = 277) were from wave 5 of an ongoing longitudinal study ([Evans et al., 2018](#)). Participants were 12-17 years old and 44.7% female, 55.3% male, 49.3% Caucasian, 50.7% non-caucasian.
- Attachment avoidance and anxiety were assessed using the **Experiences in Close Relationships Scale** ([ECR; Brennan et al., 1998](#)).
- To assess risky sexual behavior, participants completed the **Youth Risk Behavior Survey** ([Youth Risk Behavior Survey; Brener, et al., 1995](#)), a scale that measures reported general risky behaviors. We created a sexual risk composite score for number of sexual partners, condom usage, and drug or alcohol consumption prior to engaging in sexual behaviors.

RESULTS

- We conducted multiple regression analyses using SPSS. We regressed risky sexual behavior on both attachment avoidance and anxiety, along with covariates.
- Next, controlling for covariates, we tested whether gender interacts with attachment anxiety and avoidance in predicting risky sexual behavior.
- There was a significant main effect of attachment anxiety ($\beta = -.287, p = .001$), with greater anxiety predicting less risky behavior, and avoidance ($\beta = .206, p = .014$), with greater avoidance predicting greater risky behavior.
- There was a marginally significant interaction between attachment avoidance and gender ($\beta = -.558, p = .09$) in predicting risky sexual behavior, such that the impact of attachment avoidance was significant for girls ($\beta = .337, p = .003$), but not for boys ($\beta = .12, p = .63$).

	B	p
MAIN EFFECTS		
Attachment Avoidance	.206	.014*
Attachment Anxiety	-.287	.001**
Gender	-.194	.016*
Age	-.229	.003**
Income	.079	.349
Race	-.110	.191
INTERACTION EFFECTS		
Gender X Avoidance	-.558	.090*
Avoidance: Girls	.337	.003**
Avoidance: Boys	.12	.63
Gender X Anxiety	.073	.744

DISCUSSION

- Results suggest the importance of attachment style in predicting adolescents' risky sexual behavior.
- Avoidant individuals were found to engage in a significant amount of sexual risk-taking, and this effect was marginally stronger for girls. Anxious individuals were found to engage in little sexual risk-taking.
- Both main effects were the opposite of what we hypothesized.
- These findings **shed light on the specific groups of adolescents who are at a higher risk for participating in risky sexual behaviors and have implications for attachment interventions.**