

Attachment Effects Across Development and Effective Intervention

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Attachment Theory Overview

- ❖ John Bowlby (1951) theorized that for human species to survive the very young must be attached to a stronger protector or “behavioral system” to reduce risk for the vulnerable young.
- ❖ He believed that there is a biological drive between an infant and a mother to behave reciprocally to ensure the safety of the young. The mother is driven to protect the young, and the young will stay close to the mother for protection.
- ❖ Bowlby believed that early attachment experiences within the environment heavily influenced development of the mind.

The Creation of Primary Attachment

- ❖ Secure attachment begins at birth and is reinforced by consistently responsive interaction with the caregiver.
- ❖ Secure infant attachment leads to the development of an **Internal Working Model**
- ❖ Bowlby (1973) defines an internal working model (IWM) as the aggregation or organization of experiences and interactions between the infant and the mother into enduring images of themselves and other people in the environment.
- ❖ Those images serve as the internal working model, or a set of expectations about the likelihood of being able to trust others and to have their needs met by others.
- ❖ This can also be considered a cognitive framework, or a set of beliefs about themselves and the world around them.

Creation of a Distorted Internal Working Model

- ❖ A securely attached infant constructs an internal working model that views themselves as valuable and others as responsive and trustworthy because their needs have been met consistently
- ❖ A sense of security develops based on the availability or proximity of the caregiver.
- ❖ If the caregiver rejects the infant consistently or is an inadequate caregiver, the infant constructs an internal working model of the environment as hostile and the self as unworthy.
- ❖ A primary developmental component of the IWM is Reflective Functioning Capacity, aka....theory of mind

Reflective Functioning

- ❖ Through these early interactions with the caregiver, the infant constructs an understanding of their own mental state and the mental state of others.
- ❖ Understanding one's own mental state is having an awareness of what you feel and your own intentions.
- ❖ This capacity is used, typically unconsciously to “make meaning” of your own and others thoughts and feelings.
- ❖ A system that enables organization of emotions and thoughts that create a template for behavioral choices and actions. Allows inference of intent
- ❖ Operationalized through body language, facial expressions, and memory

Early evidence of RFC

- ❖ Hamlin (2013) showed that as early as 8 months, securely attached infants begin to show awareness of emotions of others and empathetic responding.
- ❖ Puppet study example-securely attached



Parenting Styles and Attachment

Parenting Styles and Attachment

- ❖ A look at parenting behaviors that encourage or impede secure attachment formation
- ❖ Parenting styles differ to some degree across cultures and generations.
- ❖ There are particular parenting styles that research has determined to consistently result in adults who are able to function in ways that are determined to be socially, psychologically, and emotionally healthy (Boelte et al., 2012).
- ❖ These patterns of effective parenting tend to be very similar across cultures.

Parenting Styles and Attachment

- ❖ There are three distinct parenting styles that have a critical impact on long term functioning:
- ❖ **Authoritative Style**
 - Parents will give expectations and explain why they have them, and also listen to the child's feelings and thoughts
 - physical discipline is not often used. Discussion is more often used to settle disputes or solve problems.
 - they tend to be very involved in the children's lives, but also encourage autonomy.

Parenting Styles and Attachment

❖ **Authoritarian Style**

- Marked by efforts of the parent to control the child (Pinquart, 2015).
- Don't often discuss conflicts, but demand adherence to a set of rigid rules
- Responsiveness to emotional needs is minimal with very little empathy to what the child may be experiencing and need from them.

Parent Styles and Attachment

❖ **Permissive**

- Less likely to have rules and boundaries and more likely to let children set own limits
- Less involvement in activities
- Responsiveness and nurturing tends to be inconsistent and unpredictable leading to negligence of emotional and physical needs.

Critical Parenting Factors for Attachment Security

- ❖ Two of the most fundamental and important factors involved in the attachment experience include;
 1. **Quality and consistency of responses** to the child by the caregiver
 2. Consistently imparting a sense of **safety and security** to the child, while allowing an appropriate degree of autonomy

Responsiveness

- ❖ Through the process of **mirroring**, the infant becomes emotionally attuned with the caregiver, thereby eventually learning to understand and regulate their own emotions (parent accurately reflects emotions)
- ❖ They also learn to develop empathy for others by learning how to take the perspective, or understand the experience of others (This is the beginning of reflective functioning).
- ❖ As the child gets older, responsiveness is reinforced by responding in a way that validates the child's emotions, leading to the child's ability to trust his/her emotional responses as accurate

Safety/Security

- ❖ Attachment security is measured through the observation of the interactions between mother and child. A securely attached child will venture away from the mother.
- ❖ A securely attached infant will gradually explore independently while checking back to the caregiver as a home base for security. Having confidence or a sense of trust in oneself comes from an initial confidence and sense of trust in the beginning environment.
- ❖ Scaffolding, into toddlerhood, encourages risk, and trust of one's judgment and problem solving

Factors

- Impeding Attachment Formation

Effects of Parent Attachment Security

- ❖ Many individuals who are insecurely attached as children will be insecurely attached as adults
- ❖ When these adults become parents, their ability to parent effectively may be compromised by their own attachment-related issues.
- ❖ The capacity to understand one's own emotions and relate to others' feeling is often found to be decreased in adults with insecure attachment.

Reflective Functioning Capacity of Parent

- ❖ In a study focusing on reflective functioning capacity (RFC) of mothers and the effect on infant's attachment security, (Stacks, 2015) it was found that RFC was significantly associated with the parent's sensitivity toward their children.
- ❖ Parents with low RFC exhibited:
 - more yelling
 - more threatening
 - more difficulty in anticipating and responding to the emotional cues of their child
- ❖ Ineffective response to the emotional cues of their child due to their own attachment issues, may adversely affect the child's internal working model and their own RFC

Insecurely Attached Mothers

- ❖ Study of mothers with an insecure attachment (Crugnola, 2013)
- ❖ 41 mothers, infants were 9 months
- ❖ Insecurely attached mothers:
 - Did not initiate interactions with the infant
 - Did not reflect infant's emotions accurately
 - Were not emotionally attuned to their infant's emotions, leading to the infant not trusting their own emotions

Environmental Effects on Attachment

- ❖ When parents are overwhelmed by stressors out of their control, such as poverty, racism, or family issues, s ability to focus on attaching to an infant.
- ❖ Poverty
 - Has been shown to influence the parent's ability to recognize and respond to their children's emotional needs effectively (Sadler et al., 2013).
 - Parents who experience joblessness, low education, and a stressful environment demonstrate less empathetic responding and more negative parenting, such as threatening and demeaning their children.
 - If there is also a lack of outside support for the family, that will add to the stress and increase the likelihood of non-responsive reactions from the parents to the child's needs.

Effects of Insecure Attachment Across Developmental Domains

- ❖ The presence of insecure attachment has consistently been shown to influence a child's social, psychological, and emotional development.
- ❖ For example, a meta-analysis (Groh, et al., 2011) found that internalizing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal were reported more often in children with an insecure attachment. (24mo. - 16 yr.)

Cognitive Development

- ❖ During the period of birth to two years old, infants construct an understanding of the world through experiences that are primarily sensory.
- ❖ Schemes are created through physical actions or behaviors.
- ❖ Later in that beginning phase, as language develops and motor skills increase, there are more opportunities for experiences.
- ❖ Children create cognitive structures based on their experiences and become more skilled in strategizing.
- ❖ If during this period the infant experiences consistently neglectful parenting, they will create a cognitive structure or internal working model (IWM) organized around these experiences.

Socio-emotional Development

- ❖ Most attachment theorists (Fonagy, Gergely, & Target, 2007) agree that insecurely attached children have less ability to perceive and understand oneself and others' behavior
- ❖ Perception of their own and others emotions is less developed than their securely attached peers. This would have negative implications for social competence and establishing relationships.
- ❖ Hamlin (2013) showed that as early as 8 months, securely attached infants begin to show awareness of emotions of others and empathetic responding.
- ❖ Puppet study example-securely attached
- ❖ With a child this age who may be at risk for insecure attachment due to their environment, they may not demonstrate the same behaviors because they are not developing a IWF consistent with a nurturing parent or environment.

Socioemotional Development

- ❖ Looking farther down the line to early school age, the lack of ability to understand and empathize with others' emotions may lead to problems with social interactions and relationships.
- ❖ The lack of social relationships can lead to feeling isolated and lonely which can lead behavior issues.
- ❖ Empathy study with 3 year old children
- ❖ Attached children are more likely to display empathy
- ❖ This study indicates that attachment may well be linked to a child's reflective functioning capacity.

Neurobiological Development

- ❖ Children who have been raised in institutions with multiple caregivers have abnormal patterns of response in the areas of the brain that are connected with emotional response, mainly the prefrontal cortex and amygdala (Tottenham et al. 2011).
- ❖ Throughout the attachment relationship, the systems of infant's limbic system in the right brain organize information, which is responsible for emotion regulation and interpretation of socioemotional information (Schoore, 2015).
- ❖ The process of organizing this information results in the creation of the IWM.

Neurobiological Continued

- ❖ In a longitudinal study over 22 years (Moustiana et al., 2014) insecurely attached children at 18 months who showed altered neural circuitry in regards to regulating emotions were found to still be unable to regulate emotions at age 22, as compared to their securely attached peers who were able to regulate emotions at both time points.
- ❖ This would suggest that insecurely attached individuals as adults have a persistent inability to regulate emotions, suggesting that the IWM and the capacity for reflective functioning has potentially long-lasting neurobiological effects.

Psychological Development

- ❖ Insecurely attached children as well as adults are found to be more prone to negative emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, and anxiety, as well as a higher intensity of emotions and difficulty regulating those emotions
- ❖ Insecure attached children show more incidence of shyness, isolating behaviors, and difficulty with peer interactions (Sin & Santo, 2016)
- ❖ Into adulthood, this pattern tends to be persistent (Delvecchio et al., 2016). Adults with insecure attachment styles tend to have persistent anxiety in regards to interpersonal relationships and tend to emotionally distance themselves from others in distressing situations
- ❖ As a child moves into adulthood without the ability to accurately regulate these behavior patterns are persistent and severe, it can lead to larger issues such as proactive violence and interpersonal aggression

Impact of Insecure Attachment into Adulthood

Impact of Insecure Attachment Into Adulthood

- ❖ As the insecurely attached child becomes an insecurely attached adult, they continue to view the world as an unsafe and unpredictable place
- ❖ They often continue to view themselves as unworthy as unloveable
- ❖ Only over the past few decades the effects of attachment into adulthood have been examined. Adult attachment styles are determined based on the measurement of two dimensions: avoidance and anxiety. Secure attachment represents low score on both those dimensions
- ❖ Unlike infant attachment classification, (categorical) adult security is typically measured on a continuum with avoidance and anxiety being continuous dimensions.
- ❖ Adult Attachment Interview (Read & Collins, 1990) as reference

Adult Attachment

Classifications

Secure

- ❖ Low anxiety and low avoidance
 - Comfortable being in mutually close relationships
 - Trusts others appropriately

Preoccupied

- ❖ High anxiety and low avoidance
 - Difficulty being alone
 - Tends to get into close relationships quickly, high emotional expression
 - Worries that others don't want to be emotionally close

Dismissive

- ❖ Low anxiety and high avoidance
- ❖ Able to have close relationship
- ❖ Difficulty depending on others for emotional support
- ❖ Avoids having others be dependent on them for emotional support

Fearful

- ❖ High anxiety and high avoidance
- ❖ Uncomfortable in close relationships
- ❖ Difficulty trusting others
- ❖ Worries about being hurt in relationships

Insecure Attachment

- ❖ All types of insecure attachment are characterized by:
 - Lack of trust in others
 - Limited emotional self-awareness
 - Difficulty in expressing and/or regulating emotions

examples?

Effects on Relationships and Communication

- ❖ Relationship with two securely attached partners
- ❖ Communication style:
 - Willingness to discuss emotions
 - Non-defensiveness
 - Shared strategy of problem solving
- ❖ Relationship with one or two partners with an insecure attachment
- ❖ Communication may be impaired by:
 - An inaccurate perception of the other person's emotions (Overall et al., 2015)
 - Misunderstanding of intents

Communication

- ❖ Recent study (Overall et al., 2015) highlighted how insecure attachment can affect relationships
- ❖ 57 couples assessed for attachment classification, interactions observed while they discussed traits about each other they wanted to change
- ❖ Results are classified using the dimensions of anxiety/avoidance:
 - High avoidance scorers: consistently overestimated the intensity of their partner's negative emotions, they ignored the negative emotions or responded with anger and hostility
 - High anxiety scorers: perceived partner's feelings accurately and did not react defensively, however they insisted on reassurance of their partner's affection and commitment to the relationship, expressed fear that partner may be angry and leave them
 - When responsiveness and empathy are not learned through the initial interactions with the caregiver, a struggle to restore these capacities are often played out through adulthood and at the expense of relationships

Antisocial Personality Disorder

- ❖ When an insecure attachment persists into adulthood without intervention or change, the resulting behaviors are often severe enough to fit the criteria for a personality disorder.
- ❖ Focus on APD

Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD)

- ❖ Determined by the presence of the following methodology:
 - Failure to obey laws and norms by engaging in behavior which results in criminal arrest, or would warrant criminal arrest
 - Lying, deception, and manipulation, for profit or self-amusement
 - Impulsive behavior
 - Irritability and aggression, manifested as frequently assaults others, or engages in fighting
 - Blatantly disregards safety of self and others
 - A pattern of irresponsibility
 - Lack of remorse for actions

(DSM, 2015)

Violence

- ❖ Lack of empathy is related to a decreased RFC, or the ability to be aware of your own emotions and the emotions of others, as previously discussed.
- ❖ This often results in negative social interactions which creates a cycle of mistrust and low self-regard.
- ❖ As the cycle continues, behavioral extremes are likely to occur, such as aggression or violent behavior, usually based on the misperception that the other person has hostile intentions toward them.

Violence

- ❖ The same indicators for the disorganized type of insecure attachment are highly correlated with the interpersonal and affective traits measured on the Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 2003), especially lack of empathy
- ❖ Individuals who are insecurely attached and have extremely violent behaviors often demonstrate behaviors indicative of psychopathology, such as lack of empathy, consistent and severe violence toward others, and persistent interpersonal problems.

Research Results

Violence and Attachment

Impaired working model due to lack of attachment

Perceptual experience affected across development

Reflective incapacity/violent behaviors

Problem Statement: Insecure attachment in early childhood has long term emotional, psychological, and behavioral effects that result in harmful and potentially violent behaviors in adulthood.

- What experiences were most impactful?
- What could have made a difference in self perception?
- How does a person with a violent criminal history perceive the attachment relationship?

Methodology

- ❖ N=17
- ❖ Comparative sample groups
- ❖ Insecure attachment/Violent criminal history
- ❖ Insecure attachment/No violent criminal history
- ❖ Secure attachment/Violent criminal history
- ❖ Secure attachment/No violent criminal history

- **Adult Attachment Scale** (Collins & Read, 1990).
- 18 items
- Measures three dimensions underlying adult attachment styles
 - Close**; the extent to which an individual is comfortable with closeness
 - Depend**; the extent to which one feels that they can depend on others
 - Anxious**; the extent to which one feels anxious or fearful about being abandoned or unloved
- ❖ Resulting Styles are: **Fearful, Dismissing, Preoccupied**
- Also identifies the relationship between these dimensions and cognitive working models of self and others by connecting core components of the internal working model and core components of attachment classifications (Ainsworth, 1978)

	Securely Attached	Insecurely Attached
Violent	Female-Bipolar Disorder Female-Bipolar Disorder Male-Bipolar Disorder Male-Bipolar Disorder	Male (Fearful)-Antisocial Personality Disorder Male (Fearful)-Antisocial Personality Disorder Female (Fearful)-Antisocial Personality Disorder Male (Dismissing)-Antisocial Personality Disorder
Non-Violent	Male Female Female	Female (Fearful) Female (Fearful) Female (Dismissing) Female (Dismissing) Female (Fearful) Male (Preoccupied)

Results

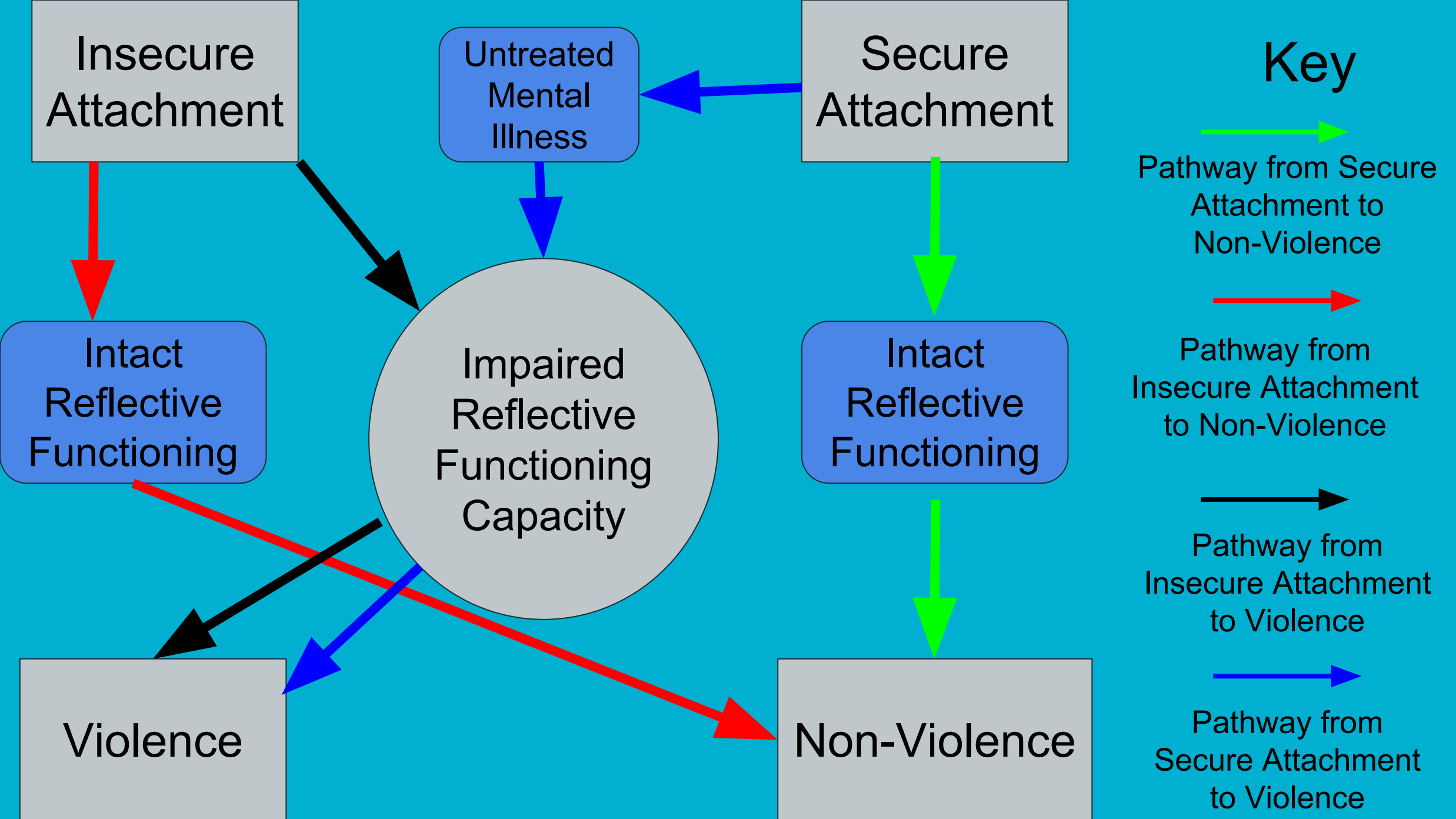
- ❖ Participants classified with an insecure attachment style and history of criminal violence
 - Consistently made statements of decreased RFC
 - Diminished capacity to take the perspective of another: “They need to know what makes me so mad, and not do it, what if I get so mad and kill them, then what would happen to me?”
 - Statements show a decreased capacity for empathy and lack of awareness of other’s experiences.
 - Decreased RFC may play a critical role in predicting violent behaviors
 - Overreact emotionally and violently based on distorted perceptions of other’s intent

Results

- ❖ Insecurely attached and non-violent adults (n=6)
 - All 6 participants had an intact IWM
 - None of the participants made statements showing decreased reflective functioning capacity
 - Showed accurate understanding of other's intentions
 - Reflected concern for others

Results

- ❖ Presence of mental illness
 - The study findings suggest that untreated mental illness may also have an effect on RFC, regardless of attachment classification.
 - Mental illness is a confounding variable that can affect the internal working model
 - Participants who were securely attached and violent all had a mental illness, potentially affecting their IWM and therefore their violent behaviors.



Effective Therapeutic Intervention

Therapeutic Intervention With Adults With Insecure Attachment

- ❖ Therapeutic intervention with adults with insecure attachment styles can often be challenging. The task of the therapist is to establish themselves as a secure base from which clients can safely explore the painful aspects of their lives and work towards change.
- ❖ Depending on attachment style, an individual is likely to respond in specific ways to any chosen strategy.

Disorganized Attachment

- ❖ Hallmarks of this style include:
 - Being uncomfortable and ambiguous about relationships
 - Trusting a therapist would be difficult. This may be evidenced by not showing up for appointment, cancelling appointments, tangential aspects to conversation
- ❖ An effective therapeutic strategy will include
 - Having patience with establishing the relationship
 - Contacting client even when they have missed or no showed an appointment
 - Recognize that fear and shame due to severe trauma and neglect likely underlie the behaviors

Anxious Attachment

- ❖ Clients with this attachment style:
 - More comfortable with self-disclosure
 - Have difficulty talking about anything besides their feelings
 - Difficulty regulating their emotions
- ❖ Effective therapeutic strategy
 - Help the client to recognize the function or cognitive aspect of their emotions, while slowly learning to tolerate and modulate them
 - Set strict boundaries regarding the relationship and keep in mind that anxiety about being abandoned underlies the behaviors

Dismissing/Avoidant or Fearful Attachment

- ❖ Likely to;
 - Be reserved and unwilling to trust another person
 - Avoid situations or topics that may trigger emotions
 - Have few to none meaningful relationships
- ❖ Effective strategy
 - Encouraging relationships with others
 - Encourage vulnerability through the therapeutic relationship
 - Be respectful of the pace the client sets