



Invited summaries of research for scholar and practitioner allies of foster alumni and other traditionally hidden college student populations

Hidden College Student Populations

Not visibly identifiable

Often without voice

May be resistant to self-identifying

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a bi-monthly publication of invited research summaries that target the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner allies for former foster youth and other traditionally hidden college student populations. The first six issues pre-empt the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Foster Alumni and other traditionally hidden college populations**, the nation's first research conference in this interdisciplinary area of study. The conference will be hosted by OSU and held February 19-20, 2020, in Washington D.C.

Financial support for the 2020 conference is being provided by the Spencer Foundation and the OSU Christine Cashel Professorship in Higher Education & Student Affairs. The 2020 conference leadership team is: Kerri Kearney and Lisa Will, OSU; Lori Tiller, University of Georgia; Jennifer Geiger, University of Illinois; Royel Johnson, The Pennsylvania State University; and Megan Piel, The University of Texas at San Antonio. The conference will be held in concert with, and with conference support from, the 39th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina (director Jennifer Keup).

The Role of Avoidant Attachment on College Persistence and Completion Among Youth in Foster Care

Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2018). The role of avoidant attachment on college persistence and completion among youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 90, 106-117.

Research Summary

Research on college outcomes for students with foster care histories has begun to examine actionable risk and protective factors. An understudied contributor is the long-lasting effects of trauma from past maltreatment and repeated changes in caregivers and schools. One way that past trauma can affect foster youths' college outcomes is through their attachment style. Several qualitative studies have documented that, in response to repeated loss and maltreatment, some foster youth adopt a highly guarded and self-protective stance to relationships (e.g., Kools, 1999; Morton, 2018; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This is known as "avoidant attachment" in developmental psychology. While an avoidant style protects youth emotionally from future loss, it may also walls them off from important relationships that could increase their chances of persisting in college.

Research Questions

The study had three research questions:

1. Are past maltreatment, foster care changes, and school mobility associated with higher levels of avoidant attachment?
2. Does avoidant attachment decrease the chances of college persistence? Of earning a college degree?
3. Is avoidant attachment's influence on these two college outcomes explained by decreased social support?

Participants and Method:

We analyzed data that had been collected by the Midwest Study, a nine-year study (2004-2011) of young people in foster care in three Midwestern states. Participants completed in-person surveys five times at ages 17, 19, 21, 23, and 25. Information on their college enrollment, persistence, and degree completion were obtained from National Student Clearinghouse Records in 2015, when participants were 29 or 30 years old. The present analysis includes 329 Midwest Study participants who had enrolled in college.

Findings

First, as expected, participants who had experienced more maltreatment, placement changes, and school changes in the past displayed higher levels of avoidant attachment in late adolescence (around age 17).

Second, after controlling for a broad range of other factors, youth higher in avoidant attachment were less likely to persist in college and to ultimately complete a degree.

Third, the relationship between avoidant attachment and the college outcomes were partially explained by the amount of social support that youth had around the time they were in college. That is, youth high in avoidant attachment perceived having less social support, and this lowered their chances of persisting and

completing a degree. Youths' social support was not able to be investigated in great detail, and future research needs to more thoroughly explore social support at college.

Implications for Practice

The findings point to avoidant attachment as a driving force that decreases the chances of college success. A critical question is whether it is responsive to intervention.

Can foster youth high in avoidant attachment become less emotionally guarded and self-reliant, and what interventions might facilitate this?

Youth will differ in the extent to which they are ready for and receptive to changing their customary approach to relationships that have provided them with a sense of safety and protection.

Implications for Practitioners

Psychotherapy for trauma and loss is one type of intervention that may be beneficial, since it addresses trauma that underlies avoidant attachment.

Normalizing help-seeking in college may also help. College can be new, difficult, and overwhelming, and everyone encounters obstacles. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength and commitment to one's goals.

Implications For Colleges

Traditional strategies that require students to take the

initiative to seek services may not work for youth who are high in avoidant attachment. More intentional, persistent outreach may be needed to reach these students.

Campus-based support programs for foster youth are promising. These programs give students the opportunity to develop close relationships with staff and peers. The family-like atmosphere that develops in many of these programs can help reclaim youths' trust in others. This may help them to be more receptive to drawing on others for support in times of need.

Conclusion

Even though this is an early study, it is important to look at avoidant attachment and to explore how it affects youths' social support on campus, including which interventions may be effective. Trauma leaves a deep impact, and there is likely no easy solution.

Kools, S. (1999). Self-protection in adolescents in foster care. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 12(4), 139-152.

Morton, B. M. (2018). The grip of trauma: how trauma disrupts the academic aspirations of foster youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 75, 73-81.

Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1198-1210.

To sign up for ongoing email updates about the 2020 national conference and/or for archives of The Scholar-Practitioner, go to: education.okstate.edu/risforthursday.

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FEB. 19-20, 2020



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