

## Research Idea

# “Acting Out”: Teacher-Child Attachment Bonds And Their Affect on Adolescent Disobedience Moderated by Students with Low Self-Esteem

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Reviewable v1

Received: 28 Sep 2017 | Published: 10 Oct 2017

Citation: Brewer E (2017) “Acting Out”: Teacher-Child Attachment Bonds And Their Affect on Adolescent Disobedience Moderated by Students with Low Self-Esteem. Research Ideas and Outcomes 3: e21280. <https://doi.org/10.3897/rio.3.e21280>

## Abstract

This paper proposes whether teacher-child attachment bonds have an effect on adolescent disobedience and whether adolescents with low self-esteem moderate the effect. In this study, the definition of disobedience is deviance and delinquency. The literature states that the teacher-child relationship demonstrates positive and negative outcomes in academic performance however it does not account for self-esteem or disobedience outside the school. I hypothesize attachment bonds to show a negative relationship with students who demonstrate low self-esteem and a positive trend in disobedience. To test my hypotheses, I use various coded questionnaires from Wave I and II of the ADD Health Survey that code for academics/education, delinquency, fighting and violence, drug use, and other deviant or disobedient behavior. In order to test, I would use cross tabulation to compare students' attachment, self-esteem levels, and disobedience. All three variables require no specific order, as nominal variables, so they can compare against each other without regard for sequence. In summary, if implemented my study will add to the current research literature on the teacher-child relationship and potential evidence-based intervention programs for students.

## Keywords

teacher; child; self esteem; students; relationship; attachment; social

## Introduction

Previous research suggests that the teacher-child relationship demonstrates potential positive and negative outcomes in academic performance. According to Reeve et al. (2004) study, an increase in autonomy support can result in greater academic performance through the nurturing of students' interests and needs. Therefore, it is easy to understand that teachers play a pivotal role in the integration of students into the school structure and often perform caregiving as parents like soothing them and dispersing punishment for misbehavior (Zhang 2011). This caregiver mentality originates from the attachment theory although often applied to parental roles. As a result, children form strong or weak bonds with their teachers that often reflect in their performance with peers. Teachers' instructional practices often reflect in their favoritism for particular students that in turn can result in lowered social interaction and preference with peers (Mikami et al. 2012). I assume that lowered social preference shapes self-esteem within basic school structures, which are often, defined by peer interaction therefore teachers act as strong factors in "youth adjustment, social development, and achievement" (Sakiz et al. 2012). Thus, I propose to explore whether teacher-child attachment bonds have an effect on adolescent disobedience and whether adolescents with low self-esteem moderate the effect. This paper will discuss greatly the teacher-child relationship in relation to low versus high self-esteem and its role in adolescent disobedience. The purpose of this study will be to contribute more research on the teacher-child relationship outside of academic performance, specifically its effect on adolescent disobedience. In this study, I define disobedience within the realm of deviance, or acts outside of societal norms, and delinquency.

Although vast areas of research explore the teacher-child relationship, little research dictates its emphasis outside of the school structure. Many researchers cite improved academic performance and some reduction in disciplinary action however they do not account for self-esteem or disobedience outside the school structure. If a teacher displays close attachment with a student, it can be surmised that self-esteem or sense of self has been improved through this bond. Research shows that the primary caregivers play a significant role in adolescent development and I apply this same concept to the teacher-child relationship. Also, teachers have also reported feeling a sense of low self-esteem and helplessness through poor student-teacher relationship therefore it is understandable to consider that students exemplify this same feeling from the relationship (Spilt et al. 2011). Teachers often feel a sense of accountability for their students and therefore internalize what they deem as failure. The same concept is applicable to the perceived self worth of adolescents, who often seek approval from authority figures like teachers. No research explores self-esteem as a moderating factor in the teacher-child relationship and more

specifically, its role in disobedience or outside school performance. In order to explore this area of research, I will explore various terms and sociological theories such as: autonomy support, attachment theory, sense of belonging, self-esteem, teacher-child relationships, and engagement.

## Literature Review

Most past research has focused on peer relationships instead of the teacher-child relationship (Birch and Ladd 1998). Even less research explores the causes of consequences of this teacher-child relationship. In Birch and Ladd (1998) study, little was known on how the teacher-child relationship could affect children's behavior and little research has been added to this question. Numerous studies suggest that children's way of treating others results similarly in peer and teacher-child relationships (Birch and Ladd 1998, Hamre and Pianta 2001). Essentially, more reserved children are less likely to be confrontational and thus develop less conflictual relationships with their teachers in order to seek support and affirmation (Birch and Ladd 1998).

Due to teacher's profound effect on students, we have discovered that the teacher's relationship can improve children's academic and behavioral outcomes (regarding school disciplinary action) (Hamre and Pianta 2001). Negativity levels between teachers and students provide a more substantial predictor of school disciplinary action (Hamre and Pianta 2001), thus a possible indicator of disobedience outside of school in respect to their teacher-child relationship.

Past studies pull from the attachment theory in their assessment of the teacher-child relationship and its effect on adolescent academic performance (Hamre and Pianta 2001, Zhang 2011). Attachment theory dictates that children who engage in strong attachments with their caregiver actively participate more and ultimately adjust better. According to Hamre and Pianta (2001) early adult relationships play a significant role in adjustment for children and can reflect positively in the classroom setting. Children who do not demonstrate strong attachments are at risk for less social capability and low self-esteem (Hamre and Pianta 2001).

Previous research also suggests that the relationship provides support for not only the child but also the educator. Strong relationships with students create motivation to teach (Hamre and Pianta 2001) as well as internal rewards and satisfaction in their work (Spilt et al. 2011). However, as Birch and Ladd (1998) discover, little research covers the teacher-child relationship and children's outcomes higher than early elementary school. Aside from their study on the trajectory of student's outcomes through eighth grade, research has since grown to include more studies on later elementary and middle school. The age range for middle to early high school students provide a foundation for study because this stage demonstrates increased conflict with parents increased and decreased emotional interaction (McGue et al. 2005) whereas school structures introduce more significant social bonds like the teacher-child relationship. Their results indicate that high levels of negativity with a teacher are a large predictor in behavioral problems for the future (Hamre and Pianta

2001), suggesting that teachers' influence plays a pivotal role in student adjustment. In assessing their student's interests and needs, they take a more active role in engaging and motivating students to actively participate in the social classroom atmosphere (Reeve et al. 2004). Children who demonstrated earlier social behavior correlated positively with teacher-child closeness (Birch and Ladd 1998). Reeve et al. (2004) results indicate that teachers' autonomy support indicate a significant effect on engagement in class. This support aids in social behavior and strengthens the perceived attachment bond between teacher and student. Children's social relationships influence their development as well as the development of their social relationships (Sakiz et al. 2012).

By examining teacher support we explore sense of belonging, which gives us one determinate for the sense of self (Sakiz et al. 2012). In Sakiz et al. (2012) study, their assessment of student's perception of teacher's support (i.e. respect, encouragement, care, fairness). The study concludes a connection between academic hopelessness and sense of belonging, which indicates a negatively related relationship with academic self-efficacy (Sakiz et al. 2012). This relationship suggests that perceive teacher support and sense of belonging could be predictors of a strong or weak attachment bond between teacher and student. Support behaviors that incorporate respect, concern, fairness, etc. contribute to positive changes in student's motivational, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Sakiz et al. 2012).

Sense of belonging can also be identified as a component of a child's self-esteem. In Doumen et al. (2011) study, teacher-child conflict had a major indirect effect on children's aggressive behavior through its effect on children's self-esteem. Their findings suggest that teachers have a consistent impact children's externalizing behavior. Low self-esteem is expected to amplify children's externalizing behavior, specifically aggressive behavior (Doumen et al. 2012).

Sense of belonging can also be readily identified as self-esteem in regards to social acceptance and interaction from peer perception through teacher's favoritism for specific students. In Mikami et al. (2012) study, they examine teacher's practices influence on peer social preference and its effect on externalized behavioral problems. Students in favor with some teachers can grow in social preference in comparison to students who do not, changing their social stance and perception in the classroom. Teachers who demonstrate emotional support create a socially accepting classroom environment and thus higher social preference and stronger relationships with students (Mikami et al. 2012). In contrast, teachers who place students within a hierarchy communicate that the children are socially unequal (Mikami et al. 2012), altering the classroom dynamic and ultimately their self-esteem about social preference. I propose that this hierarchy causes them to question their teacher-child relationship and ultimately could result in weaker attachment bonds.

Although all of these articles are beneficial to my proposed research many articles rarely discuss the importance of the teacher in the "teacher-child relationship" and how it can play an important role in adjustment for them as well. I refer to Spilt et al. (2011) who explore the extent that teacher-child relationships affect the self-esteem of teachers and their necessity for closeness with their students. High conflict teacher-child relationships can

undermine teachers' value and induce feelings of helplessness (Spilt et al. 2011). Also, teachers spend a majority of their time in the classroom, which suggests that their relationships may provide a need for belongingness (Spilt et al. 2011). I propose that this same notion may be applicable to the child of the relationship. Like teachers, students spend large amounts of time in class and the overall school structure. If teachers experience a shift in self-esteem due to teacher-child relationships, it can be surmised that students experience the same effect. In achieving attachment, the individual can maintain emotional security through the bond (Spilt et al. 2011). Without emotional support it is unlikely that the teacher-child relationship will form strongly and could possibly result in the adolescent's disobedience.

## Hypotheses and Expectations

As mentioned, previous research demonstrates a correlation between significant attachment in the teacher-child relationship and its effect on academic performance. I propose to apply that concept outside of the school structure in the form of adolescent disobedience. Also, I propose that the attachment bond is moderated by adolescent self-esteem. I hypothesize that weak teacher-child attachment bonds result in adolescent disobedience as moderated by those with low self-esteem. Although, all students can exhibit high or low self-esteem, it is my hypothesis that those with weaker bonds will exhibit lower levels of self-esteem and thus more likely to "act out" in disobedience. Therefore, I expect attachment bonds to show a negative relationship with students who demonstrate low self-esteem and a positive trend in disobedience. To counteract the current limitations in this area of research, I will investigate (1) whether or not middle school teachers describe experiencing strong or weak relationships with their students, (2) whether the students demonstrate a lower levels of self-esteem and (3) whether they perform acts of disobedience outside of school as measured on an index. I first hypothesized that the effectiveness of teacher-child attachment bonds affects adolescent disobedience. To test my first hypothesis, I would utilize various coded questionnaires from Wave I and II of the ADD Health Survey that code for academics/education, delinquency, fighting and violence, drug use, and other deviant behavior (Suppl. material 1). The questions are detailed in the attached Suppl. material 1. I chose to categorize all of these within an index under the label of disobedience. In developing my hypothesis, I rely on theories from previous research including: attachment theory, engagement or autonomy support, and self-esteem.

## Data Collection

Wave I includes data collection between 1994 and 1995 using a clustered sampling design. With the school as main area of study, it is much easier to access most participants, peers, and teachers through this method. The primary sampling frame for Add Health is a database collected by through 80 high schools selected to represent schools in the United States. These schools are a reflection of course, with respect to region of country, size, type, and ethnic background. Their recruitment tactics for the study resulted in a pair of

schools in each of 80 communities with a total of 132 schools in the study. The In-School Questionnaire was given to over 90,000 students in grades 7 through 12 in a 45-60 minute time period. Parents were also notified prior to the study if they didn't want their children to participate. In order to record the data, each school provided a student roster with assigned numbers for each participant. These rosters were collected and destroyed afterward.

Based on the data from the In-School Questionnaire, four ethnic-group samples were determined including: 1,038 Blacks, 334 Chinese, 450 Cuban, and 437 Puerto Rican.

All enrolled students in 16 schools were selected for in-home interviews. These were two large schools and 14 small schools. One of the large schools was predominantly white and located in a mid-sized town and the other was diverse and located in a major area.

All respondents received the same interview, which was one to two hours long, whoever, in this instance no paper questionnaires were used for confidentiality. Instead, all data were recorded on laptop computers. Care was taken to screen respondents on age and experience so that only appropriate questions were asked. Additional questions concerning the co-occurrence of risk behaviors were asked of respondents who indicated multiple behaviors, for example, fighting while using drugs or drinking while carrying a weapon.

In contrast, Wave II utilizes in-home interviews as a follow-up to the in-home interviews with the adolescents from the previous wave a year later. The second wave surveyed 15,000 of the same students one year after Wave I. Some students are not accounted for due to grade eligibility and as result a 65 adolescents were added to the sample for Wave II. Considering this addition, it is possible to notice a difference in the range of responses in the data. Wave II in-home interviews took place in mid to late 1996. Wave I and II included School Administrator Telephone Interviews, however, for the purpose of the study I decided they were irrelevant to my research group. The ADD Health Survey provides a great foundation for research already conducted and applicable to future research like the study that I am proposing. Also, ADD Health addresses a large range within my index of disobedience in order to effectively assess the extent of my research question including: academics, fighting, drug use, and delinquency.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to test my research question, I would use cross tabulation to compare students' attachment, self-esteem levels, and disobedience. All 3 variables require no specific order, as nominal variables, so they can be compared against each other without regard for sequence. Although, my study proposal demonstrates potential application in the research world, it also deserves critique in some areas.

Since my study relies heavily on secondary data to assess children's disobedience I suggest maybe a future study using more intensive interviewing for a primary data approach. It is possible that this method could give a new perspective on the topic. One large discrepancy with the data set references the lack of questions addressed at self perception or self-esteem, a very common issue during the adolescent developmental

stage. This fact poses a problem for my research question that could use some revision in a possible future study.

In addition, although Caucasians are the racial majority, little of this fact is evident in the questionnaire information from Wave I and II. I understand the balance to express different regions across the United States but the racial majority is still a very important component of determining results. In addition, it is unclear about the race or ethnic background of the interviewers, so it is reasonable to consider that their ethnic background may have played a part in how participants chose to respond. If a respondent identified with their interviewer they may feel compelled to answer in a particular way. It is important to notice that each wave also explores a different stage of development, as each wave demonstrates new information to add to the knowledge of the research world for a different stage. By utilizing various stages of development growth, the researchers add significantly to the literature in studying teacher-child interaction at critical stages.

In summary, if implemented my study will add to the current research literature on the teacher-child relationship as well as adolescent disobedience. I hope that future implications could lead to evidence-based intervention programs for students. As previous research explains, teachers play an important role in students' adjustment and, "developmental outcomes [thus] further examination of factors associated with these relationships is warranted" (Zhang 2011).

## Acknowledgements

This proposal would not have been possible without the academic support of North Carolina State University Sociology Department. This research was done while the author was a student at the university. Most importantly, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandfather Bertram C. Brewer, may he rest in peace.

## Hosting institution

North Carolina State University

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## Supplementary material

### Suppl. material 1: Appendix A [doi](#)

**Authors:** ADD Health Survey

**Data type:** Wave I and II

**Filename:** Appendix A.docx - [Download file](#) (22.13 kb)