Statement of Research: Patricia Kerig

The “Umbrella” of Developmental Psychopathology

The theoretical perspective that informs my research is encompassed within what Thomas Achenbach (1990) referred to as the “umbrella” of developmental psychopathology. Developmental psychopathology is an integrative model that calls for the systematic examination of the emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and biological mechanisms that individually and interactively impart both risk for and resilience against psychopathology as it emerges over the life course (Kerig, 2016, in press; Kerig, Ludlow, & Wenar, 2014; Kerig, Schulz, & Hauser, 2012). Also like the ribs of an umbrella, the themes of my various projects have served as individual spokes that lend strength, coherence, and structural integrity to the whole.

Families as Sources of Risk and Resilience for Child Psychopathology

Extending from my graduate studies under the mentorship of Philip and Carolyn Cowan at UC Berkeley, the first phase of my independent program of research focused on understanding the developmental processes underlying risk and resilience for children growing up in contexts of family adversity (Becker-Bleaze & Kerig, 2016; Kerig, 2016; Kerig, in press). Thus, of particular interest to me has been the how exposure to interparental conflict, family violence, maltreatment, and other forms of interpersonal stress are linked to the development of emotional and behavioral problems in childhood and adolescence (Kerig, 1995, 1996; 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2003; Kerig et al., 1993, 1998, 2000; McConnell & Kerig, 2002). This work has involved the use of diverse methodologies, including observational coding, child-report, parent-report, and whole-family assessments, in order to “triangulate” sources of information in the way that a surveyor does so as to arrive at a richer and more multidimensional understanding of the individual and the family system (Kerig & Lindahl, 2001; Kerig, 2016).

I am intrigued with the personal meaning that individuals make of their close personal relationships and how family dynamics are internalized in such a way that they affect the development of intimacy outside the family. In this light, one of the themes of my research has been the conceptualization and measurement of the construct of parent-child boundary dissolution, which refers to the failure to maintain appropriate developmental roles in the family and to acknowledge the psychological autonomy of the child (Kerig, 2005). This work has made a much-cited contribution to the study of the family processes that underlie developmental psychopathology. I have collaborated with students and colleagues on studies examining parent-child boundary dissolution as a risk factor for youth navigating the stage-salient issues associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood in diverse cultural contexts (Kerig & Swanson, 2010; Kerig, Swanson, & Ward, 2012; Rowa, Kerig, & Geller, 2001).

From Internalizing to Externalizing

Although most of my earliest research focused on the study of internalizing disorders in children, in recent years I increasingly have turned my attention to the striking comorbidity of internalizing and externalizing problems during the adolescent period. A first step in this program of research was a project funded by the Ohio Department of Mental Health regarding the processes that underlie the association between victimization and aggression amongst school-age children and adolescents (Kerig & Sink, 2010; Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010), including dating violence in adolescence (Ball, Kerig, & Rosenbluth, 2009; Kerig, 2010; Volz & Kerig, 2010). In this context, much of our attention has focused on the role of callous-unemotional traits, which constitutes a lack of empathy and remorse that is strongly associated with youth aggression (Lin, Kerig, & Adkins, in press; Mozley, Lin, & Kerig, 2018; Mozley, Mendez, & Kerig, 2018). However, we also have made contributions to understanding the intersection of all three the components of what is termed the “dark triad” of personality traits—callousness, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—as they contribute to social acuity and “theory of mind” skills and predict of socially astute forms of interpersonal
victimization, such as relational aggression and acting as a ringleader in the bullying “circle” (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010; Stellwagen & Kerig, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2013b, in press).

Accounting for the Link between Childhood PTSD and Adolescent Delinquency

Given the overwhelming prevalence of trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress symptoms among samples of high-risk youth, my studies of youth antisocial behavior further led me to consider the role that trauma plays in the developmental psychopathology of delinquency during the adolescent period, a time of particular risk for behaviors that involve harm to the self and others (Kerig et al., 2009; Kerig, 2015). My lab has carried out a number of projects examining the interrelationships of trauma exposure, PTSD, and youth involvement in the justice system. Funding for this work has been provided by several sources, including the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, Family and Children First Council, United Way, the University Research Council, and most recently by a four-year grant from the National Institute of Justice.

This research has led us to make important basic science contributions to the understanding of the symptom structure underlying the PTSD diagnosis in adolescent samples (Bennett, Kerig, Chaplo, McGee, & Baucom, 2014; Kerig, Vanderzee, Becker, & Ward, 2012; Kerig, Ward, Vanderzee, & Arnzen, 2009; Modrowski, Mozley, & Kerig, under review). We also have generated findings that speak to debates surrounding the new PTSD criteria introduced by the recently revised DSM-5 diagnostic manual, including the appropriateness for youth of changes in the role of subjective appraisals in the phenomenology of trauma (Kerig & Bennett, 2013), the inclusion of a new dissociative subtype of PTSD (Bennett, Modrowski, Kerig, & Chaplo, 2015; Kerig et al., 2016; Modrowski, Chaplo, Bennett, & Kerig, 2017), and alterations in the definition of posttraumatic emotional numbing (Kerig et al., 2016).

A major theme in this work has been the conceptualization and study of polyvictimization, the well-replicated finding that youth in the justice system typically have experienced multiple different forms of trauma across multiple epochs of development. In collaboration with colleagues, we have conducted investigations designed to test hypotheses about the underlying developmental mechanisms linking polyvictimization to psychological and behavioral problems that increase the risk of justice involvement (Charak, Ford, Modrowski, & Kerig, in press; Ford, Charak, Modrowski, & Kerig, 2018; Kerig, 2018; Kerig & Modrowski, 2018).

In addition, we have conducted a series of investigations examining the pressing question of whether the associations among trauma exposure, posttraumatic symptoms, and youth outcomes are gender-specific and thus require gender-responsive interventions for justice-involved youth (Becker, Kerig et al., 2012; Chaplo, Kerig, Bennett, & Modrowski, 2015; Chaplo, Modrowski, Kerig, & Bennett, 2017; Kerig, 2014, 2018; Kerig, Arnzen, & Becker, 2011; Kerig & Becker, 2012; Kerig & Modrowski, 2018; Kerig & Schindler, 2013; Wekerle & Kerig, 2017).

Beneath the Mask: Primary versus Trauma-Related Callousness

In the next step in this program of research, my attention turned to the need to better explicate the “how” and “why” of these associations: What are the underlying mechanisms that account for the association between posttraumatic stress disorder and delinquency? To this end, my lab has initiated a series of studies testing the tenets of a developmental traumatology model of delinquency that distinguishes between “primary” callousness traits versus those that are “acquired” in that they arise as a function of a psychological defense against trauma (Kerig & Becker, 2010). To date, we have tested several elements of this model and have demonstrated that posttraumatic numbing of emotions serves as a mediator of the association between trauma exposure and callousness among detained youth (Kerig, Bennett, Thompson, & Becker, 2012) and that, among youth high in callous traits, those exhibiting posttraumatic symptomatology differ with respect to a number of dimensions of emotion processing, including emotion recognition, regulation, and expression (Bennett & Kerig, 2014; Chaplo et al., 2017; Kerig et al., under
review).

An important new spoke in this hub of my research is the inclusion in our protocol of measures of psychophysiological reactivity aimed at identifying those youth whose callous veneer may act as a mask for posttraumatic distress. In our four-year NIJ-funded study, we are following justice-involved youth over the course of three years in order to investigate the roles of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and psychophysiological factors in mediating the association between trauma exposure and juvenile offending. In particular, we are examining patterns of coordination between psychophysiological indices of the activity of the stress response system, specifically respiratory sinus arrhythmia and electrodermal response, which have been posited by theory to differentiate between youth who are truly callous/unemotional versus those who are exerting effort to suppress emotional reactivity (Kerig, 2018; Lin, Kerig et al., in preparation).

“Harm as Harm”—Trauma, Perpetration, and Gang Violence

Another branch of my program of research has turned to investigations of the association between trauma and acquired callousness in the context of adolescent gang activity. Inspired by Father Gregory Boyle’s observations of the profound traumatic effects on gang-involved youth of being compelled to perpetrate violence against others, which he termed “harm as harm,” my students and I collaborated with Cecilia Wainryb to explore the parallels between the dynamics underlying acquired callousness among juvenile justice-involved youth in the US and the psychological processes observed in her studies of child soldiers in international contexts (Chaplo, Kerig, & Wainryb, under review; Kerig & Wainryb, 2013; Kerig, Wainryb, Twali, & Chaplo, 2013; Wainryb & Kerig, 2013). Through an initial empirical investigation of these processes in a sample of detained youth in Utah, we found that those who were gang-involved—especially girls—reported higher levels of exposure to traumatic experiences and, further, that gang-involved youth were more likely than their peers to report having experienced traumatic events in which they themselves had been compelled to perpetrate violence against others (Kerig, Chaplo, Bennett, & Modrowski, 2016). This is the first study we are aware of that examines the concept of “perpetration-induced trauma” in an adolescent sample and we found, as theory would predict, that perpetration-induced trauma accounted for the association between gang involvement and posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Toward the Future: Translating Research from the Laboratory to the Community

A long-standing interest of mine has been the translation of research findings into insights that can inform evidence-based interventions for youth (Ball, Kerig, & Rosenbluth, 2009; Kerig, 2012, Kerig & Alexander, 2012; Kobak & Kerig, 2015; Kerig, Sink, Cuellar, Vanderzee, & Elfstrom, 2010; Kerig, Volz, Moeddel, & Cuellar, 2010; Ford, Kerig, Desai, & Feierman, 2006). The findings of my most recent studies have particularly promising translational implications by pointing to trauma as an overlooked but potentially key target for interventions for youth at risk or already involved in the justice system. As an indication of the potential real-world impact of this work, a recent research collaboration involves the development and evaluation of a pilot project to provide trauma-informed services to the Gang Reduction and Youth Development program, which has been funded by the Office of the Mayor of the City of Los Angeles (Dierkhising & Kerig, 2018; Kerig, 2018). This project brings together the themes of my research, my applied skills, and my passion for community service in a way that provides a true capstone to my career to date.