CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND NEGLECT AND ITS EFFECT ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

by

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of child abuse and neglect's effects on interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Substantial research has been done that shows that childhood maltreatment has adverse, lasting effects on the child, both internally and on their relationship building abilities. This was a between-subjects design and utilized archival data in order to study these effects. Four research questions were posed that examined social support and romantic relationship quality in childhood, young adulthood, and middle adulthood. The data for these questions was collected via self-report measures. The results found that individuals who have experienced childhood maltreatment have less social support and lower quality romantic relationships than those from the control group. This carries implications that individuals maltreated in their childhood do struggle with building relationships. These results should be utilized to put forth further research concerning other forms of maltreatment and to create interventions for maltreated individuals to find more security in their relationships.

Keywords: Abuse, neglect, interpersonal relationships, maltreatment, social support, romantic relationships

Childhood Abuse and Neglect and its Effect on Interpersonal Relationships in Adulthood

Approximately three million cases of child maltreatment were reported in the US in 2003 (Widom, Schuck, & White, 2006). With this kind of prevalence, it is important to study the individuals affected because abuse and neglect can lead to significant problems later in life, including increased rates of later victimization. There have been plenty of studies on the effects of abuse in child populations (Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006), as well as studies on interpersonal relationships, but not much research has considered these two together. The studies that do look at this intersection have shown that abuse does have an effect on the ways that people approach their relationships later in life (Horan & Widom, 2015; Infurna, Rivers, Reich, & Zautra, 2015). Along with these known effects, these studies show how the individuals themselves are affected (Chapple, Bersani, & Tyler, 2005; Horan & Widom, 2015; Widom, Schuck & White, 2006; Infurna et al., 2015). While maltreatment generally has been a very well researched topic, specific types of abuse and neglect have not been considered separately (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Stoltenborgh & van IJzendoorn, 2013).

As previously stated, 3 million abuse cases were reported in 2003, a number that has likely increased over time. With prevalence that high, it is important to be able to understand how such a large portion of the population will behave in their relationships. Such is the objective of the present study; to better understand abused populations' social relationships and how they approach them.

This study expanded upon previous research and focused on the ways in which a child's experiences with abuse and/or neglect affects the quality of their interpersonal relationships throughout their lives, as well as observing the differences in relationship quality between

neglected/abused individuals and non-maltreated individuals. This has been done by utilizing archival data and examining it through the lens of the current hypothesis.

Abuse is a very well defined form of maltreatment, as are the subsets of it. Some professionals consider child neglect to be a form of abuse, while others consider them to be two separate forms of maltreatment. This, compiled with the issues of cultural differences, a lack of immediate visibility of the effects of abuse and neglect, and the wide range of actions that can be classified as neglect, make it difficult to define what neglect actually is.

Prevalence of Abuse and Neglect

Child neglect is thought to be one of the most frequent forms of child maltreatment, and yet is one of the least reported upon forms of abuse, meaning that - ironically - child neglect is the most neglected form of child maltreatment. A meta-analysis of the available current research revealed that there is a range of 1.4% to 80.1% prevalence of neglect in maltreated populations, with only 16 studies found for physical neglect and 13 for emotional neglect as of 2012 (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Stoltenborgh & van Ijzendoorn, 2012). This wide range of percentages is potentially due to there being such a lack of comprehensive research, as well as the fact that these studies took place in a variety of different locations. Studies of low-resource countries are even scarcer, something that must be taken note of to mark how little we truly know about the impact reach for neglect. Based on the available research, it was found that 16.3% (163/1,000 cases) of children faced some form of physical neglect and 18.4% (184/1,000 cases) had faced some form of emotional neglect (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2012). This is more alarming when considering that this is only based off of a total of 29 comprehensive studies. A recent study in 2015 that provides more evidence for neglect's prevalence examined the rates of neglect

found in United States Army communities (Cozza, Fullerton, Harris, Holmes, McCarroll, Ortiz, Wryter & Ursano, 2015). The study examined 397 out of the 5,640 neglect cases that were available to study in four separate army communities. Of those cases, 640 neglect incidents were found with five types and seventeen subtypes of neglect present. The researchers posit that the increased stress on families as a result of deployment creating single parent households, along with combat-related traumas - both physical and psychological - may be a reason for this trend.

Neglect can often be a precursor to abuse as well. In 1993, a study was done involving children and adults from Canada and New Zealand wherein they were asked to complete questionnaires regarding the forms of maltreatment they experienced (Fung, Ney, & Wickett, 1993). The study looked at physical abuse and neglect, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional neglect. Of the 380 participants, most seemed to experience physical abuse, verbal abuse, and emotional neglect. The results showed that less than five percent of participants experienced only a single form of abuse or neglect. It was also seen that children who were emotionally neglected were significantly less likely to have a positive outlook on their chances for a happy marriage, while a child who experienced physical neglect were more inclined to believe they will die a violent death and will not live to an old age. Approximately 15% of young people, regardless of the form of maltreatment, believed they would one day commit suicide.

Negative Developmental Consequences of Abuse and Neglect

The “cycle of violence” has long been discussed in scholarly works; the theory that abused and victimized populations will go on to become abusers and violent victimizers (Widom, 1989). In order to test this hypothesis, Widom utilized a “specialized cohorts” design; in the context of this study, this meant that the control group is assumed to only be different from

the maltreated group in respect to not having been abused. All child abuse cases utilized in the study were pulled from court cases and involved those who were under 11 years old to ensure no delinquent behavior was already present. The study found that males had a higher frequency of criminal records than females, but regardless of gender maltreated individuals were far more likely to have criminal records than controls. Moreover, those who had been abused were found to have a higher likelihood of being arrested for violent crimes than those in the control group. However it did not reach significance levels in the chi square test. Finally, there was no notable difference between maltreated individuals and the control group when it came to arrests for child abuse.

As previously mentioned, neglect is not a clearly defined form of maltreatment due to the surrounding factors of it. This leads to many parents neglecting their children, unintentionally (Billick & Friedman, 2014). It is known that socioeconomic status, as well as a lack of education and a variety of dysfunctional family characteristics raise the risk of unintentional neglect. Poorer and more uneducated families have been found to suffer more accidental injuries or deaths of children than wealthier ones. Factors such as addiction and mental illness in parents have also been found to increase the odds of neglect significantly. These factors all play into the difficulty of researching this topic. Regardless, it is extremely important to research this topic as neglect has been shown to have serious detriments on a person's mental health. A study in Canada found that rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional neglect were rather high for children aged 10-15 (Afifi, Cheung, Katz, Sareen, Tonmyr, & Taillieu, 2014). Results indicated that those who experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or any combination of these maltreatments were correlated with increased likelihood of experiencing functional

impairments. Childhood maltreatment has also been shown to have an effect on people's mental health (Afifi, Boman, Enns, Fleisher, MacMillan, Mather & Sareen, 2010). Afifi et al., (2010) performed a nationally representative study of secondary data by pulling said data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, which involved individuals in the population aged 20 and older. Participants were asked to respond to various questions to gain an understanding of the adverse experiences they had in childhood (meaning occurring before 18), and diagnoses of personality disorders were determined via the Alcohol Use Disorder and Associated Disabilities Interview Schedule-Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition. Personality disorders are categorized into three clusters; Cluster A includes paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal; Cluster B includes antisocial, histrionic, borderline, and narcissistic; and Cluster C includes avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive. The results show that clusters A and B had the highest prevalence, especially when it came to physical abuse and neglect. Due to the fact of these being personality disorders, these findings are relevant to the present study as individuals living with these kinds of disorders are known to struggle when it comes to interpersonal relationship development.

Studies have shown that childhood maltreatment also has a negative effect on the wellbeing of individuals in middle adulthood. One study in particular, had examined personal mastery and social-emotional regulation as indicators for individual's wellbeing in adulthood (Infurna, Rivers, Reich & Zautra, 2015). Participants completed questionnaires asking about their early life, personality, and traumatic or stressful experiences they may have had. Participants also completed a 30 day diary detailing their day to day lives, reporting both positive and negative daily experiences. Each day, they also completed a positive and negative affect

scale to determine their affect that day. The results showed that those who reported higher levels of childhood trauma had a higher mean score for negative affect and lower positive affect, as compared to those who reported lower levels of trauma. It was also found that those who had higher levels of childhood trauma reported lower levels of personal mastery, meaning they felt they had less control over their lives in midlife. This suggests that those who experienced higher levels of trauma in childhood have overall lower levels of and more fluctuations in their day-to-day wellbeing. Events relating to family, friends, and partners/spouses were the most frequently reported positive events. This result is important for the present study as it is indicative of the necessity of social support in that it shows evidence of having supportive figures in one's life leading to elevated mood and overall wellbeing. Overall, higher levels of childhood trauma were associated with poorer levels of and greater fluctuation in daily wellbeing. This provides evidence for childhood trauma having a negative impact on an individual's health in midlife as seen through the heightened attention to negative events and stressors as well as one's responses to daily life events.

Social Support - Why is it Important?

Correlations have been found between positive relationships with parents and positive relationships with peers, while maltreated children have been found to have more struggles with developing positive relationships with their peers because they have a tendency to be more aggressive and withdrawn, which then leads to being rejected by their peers. This has been found to correlated to a higher likelihood of delinquency as the child grows older. Children often learn from their parents how to go about developing their interpersonal relationships, but if a child does not have a typical, healthy relationship with their parents they may not know how to

develop these relationships properly. A study performed in 2005 looked at the effects of educational, physical, and emotional neglect on adolescent violence, self-control and peer rejection (Chapple, Bersani, & Tyler, 2005). Emotional neglect was found to have a significant effect on self-control, meaning that those who experienced emotional neglect showed signs of having lower self-control. Adolescent violence was also found to be significantly affected by self-control, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. This means that in experiencing these forms of maltreatment, individuals were more likely to engage in adolescent violence. The results also showed that those who were physically neglected, or engaged in adolescent violence, were found to have a higher likelihood to experience peer rejection compared to non-maltreated individuals. In other words, those who have been neglected experience higher rates of aggression and lower social support, and this low social support in turn increases levels of aggression. It was found that the effects of neglect persist well into adolescence, and perhaps even further (Chapple et al., 2005).

It is theorized that the maltreatment a person faces in childhood can affect the way that they behave in adulthood (Widom, Schuck & White, 2006). A 2006 study conducted by Widom et al. examined the relationship between childhood victimization and problematic drinking and the subsequent pathways to violence in adulthood said factors created for those individuals. Evidence showed that children growing up in violent households are primed to believe that this behavior is normal and go on to develop aggressive behaviors in early childhood that persist. It is also suggested that childhood maltreatment is correlated with drinking problems, though a stronger link for this is found in women than men. In examining both of these pathways, the researchers found that, for men, there is a direct path from childhood maltreatment to violence -

meaning that maltreated men show signs that they will grow up to engage in violent behavior - as well as a second path that involves early childhood aggression to alcohol problems which then leads to violence. It is suggested by the researchers that these problems may develop as coping mechanisms in order to deal with depression, low self-esteem, or loneliness. This is all indicative of the aforementioned "cycle of violence" that exists for individuals with violent upbringings.

Present Study

The primary study from which the data was pulled looked at the ways in which social support, or lack thereof, played a role in the allostatic load of individuals who were maltreated in their childhood (Horan & Widom, 2015). The present study, however, focused on the ways in which a child's experiences with abuse and/or neglect affects their platonic and romantic interpersonal relationships in adulthood, as well as observing the differences in relationship building between neglected/abused individuals and non-neglected/abused individuals, and the quality of said relationships. In studying this, a greater understanding of the relationship dynamics in abused populations can be achieved. In the present study, the following questions have been examined:

1. Do abused/neglected individuals report having a close, supportive relationship with at least one adult during childhood as often as non-maltreated individuals?
2. Do abused/neglected individuals report the same romantic relationship quality as non-maltreated individuals in early adulthood?
3. Do abused/neglected individuals report the same levels of social support in middle adulthood as non-maltreated individuals?

4. Does social support or romantic relationship quality differ based on the type of abuse and neglect?

It is hypothesized that someone who has been abused or neglected will have greater difficulty than the controls in developing quality relationships at each of these timepoints (childhood, young adulthood, and middle adulthood). In exploring this, hopefully a better understanding of the roots of these kinds of issues, as well as how best to assist in developing these bonds can be achieved.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted using archival data from a longitudinal study on the effects of child abuse and neglect and involves approximately 1500 participants - 908 abuse cases and 667 control cases - drawn from court cases in the Midwestern United States between 1967 and 1971. This study used data from three waves of the original study. Of the total sample, 620 of the original participants were involved in all of these waves (48.7% female, 61.5% white). All participants, outside of the control group, were children who experienced abuse or neglect before the age of 12.

Design

The primary study was conducted in order to observe the relationship between childhood maltreatment and social support in adulthood. Once the court cases and controls were established, researchers interviewed the participants starting in 1989, with the final interview relevant to the present study occurring in 2002. The present study utilized a between-subjects design, with participants being categorized as maltreated (experienced court substantiated abuse

or neglect), and non-maltreated (the control group). The dependent variables (social support and interpersonal relationship quality) are described in detail below.

Measures

To measure social support in childhood, when participants were young adults, they were asked, ‘‘Was there any adult in your childhood with whom you felt really close?’’ The response options for this question were dichotomous (yes or no). Although prior research studies have not utilized this means of measuring social support in childhood with a single question, in the original study this question was assessed in relation to other outcomes associated with child abuse and neglect (Horan & Widom, 2015).

To measure romantic relationship quality in young adulthood, the participants were asked if they had a romantic partner or spouse, and if they responded yes they were provided with an adapted version of the Perceived Social Support (PSS) measure (Procidano & Heller, 1983). The original PSS consisted of 20 items, but was reduced to nine for the purposes of this study (e.g., ‘‘You can really talk to [your spouse/partner] about things that are important to you’’). Participants answered these questions on a scale of 1 = not at all, to 4 = almost always. The PSS has been utilized in past research in order to measure the social support that a person feels they receive from those in their personal lives.

To measure social support in middle adulthood, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985) was used. This measure includes 17 items that ask respondents about the types and quantities of social support they perceive in their own lives utilizing a set of four subscales; appraisal support (e.g., “There are several people that I trust to help solve my problems”), belonging support (e.g.,‘‘When I feel lonely, there are

several people I can talk to’’), tangible support (e.g.,‘‘If I were sick, I could easily find someone to help me with my daily chores’’), and self-esteem (e.g., “Most people I know think highly of me”). Participants answered each of these questions on a scale of 1 = definitely false, to 3 = definitely true. This measure has been used in past research for the purpose of measuring the social support an individual perceives that they receive from their interpersonal relationships.

Procedure

Due to this study utilizing archival data, there was no additional data collection performed. At each wave of the original study, participants provided informed consent and the study was previously approved by an Institutional Review Board. Data were stored and analyzed using SPSS version 25. For the first research question, a chi-square test was conducted. For the second and third research questions independent samples t-tests were run. A one-way ANOVA was run for the fourth question. A t-test was run to examine the relationship between the types of maltreatment, childhood social support, and the quality of relationships in adulthood.

Results

Before any of the study research questions were analyzed, sample descriptive statistics were run to get a clear understanding of the prevalence of each form of maltreatment in the sample. Of the 676 participants in the maltreated group (which makes up 56.5% of the entire sample), 110 (9.2%) experienced physical abuse, 96 (8.0%) experienced sexual abuse, and 543 (45.4%) experienced neglect. These numbers account for the 50 (7.4%) participants who experienced multiple forms of maltreatment (which is why the total adds up to more than 676).

The first research question looked at whether differences were present between the maltreated and control groups in terms of whether or not they had a close, supportive figure in

their childhood. In order to examine this, a chi-square test for independence was run as the independent and dependent variable for this analysis were both categorical. Due to this, this test is appropriate for measuring this research question. The chi-square test indicated a significant difference between abuse status and support from adults in childhood, chi-square (n = 888) = 6.153, p = .013 (see Table 1). These results indicated that maltreated individuals do not have a supportive figure in their childhood as often as their control counterparts, which supports the hypothesis put forth.

Table 1: *Supportive Adult Figure in Childhood*

Group	No supportive figure	Yes supportive figure
Control	22 (5.6%)	373 (94.4%)
Abused/neglected	50 (10.1%)	443 (89.9%)

The second research question considered whether romantic relationship quality in early adulthood differed between the participant groups. In order to test this, an independent samples t-test was conducted to measure the mean difference between two groups. Supporting the hypothesis, the results of this analysis showed a significant difference in the relationship quality for controls (M = 16.51, SD = 2.77) and maltreated individuals (M = 15.21, SD = 3.55); t(886) = 5.92, p = .000. These results indicated that maltreated individuals tend to have lower relationship qualities in early adulthood than the control group.

Another independent samples t-test was run for the third research question - comparing perceived social support in middle adulthood between maltreated individuals and controls. There was a significant difference found between the maltreated individuals (M = .75, SD = .20), and

controls (M = .82, SD = .16); $t(886) = 5.70$, p = .000. These results suggest that maltreated individuals had lower social support in middle adulthood compared to controls, as hypothesized.

In order to address the fourth and final research question, which examined how social support and romantic relationship quality differ based on the type of abuse and neglect that was experienced, two one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. This type of analysis is appropriate to use when comparing mean scores on a continuous measure between multiple groups. In this case the four groups were neglected, physically abused, sexually abused, and those who experienced any combination of these. Mean scores for these groups on the measures of social support and romantic relationship quality are shown in Tables 2 and 3. The results of the first one-way ANOVA indicated that social support was significantly different across these four groups, $F(3, 489) = 2.7$, p = .045. The results of the second one-way ANOVA indicated that romantic relationship quality was significantly different across the four groups, $F(3, 489) = 2.94$, p = .033. These results, in support of the hypothesis, indicate that participants who experienced any combination of maltreatment had significantly lower social support as well as romantic relationship quality compared to those who only experienced one form of maltreatment.

Table 2. *Results of Measuring Social Support and Type of Abuse*

Type of Maltreatment	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Physical	36	.76	.124
Sexual	49	.76	.232
Neglect	358	.76	.193
Combination	50	.68	.226

Table 3. *Results of Measuring Romantic Relationship Qualities and Type of Abuse*

Type of Maltreatment	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Physical	36	15.9	2.05
Sexual	49	15.2	4.14
Neglect	358	15.3	3.47
Combination	50	13.9	4.08

Discussion

This study looked at the relationship between childhood maltreatment and the effects it had on interpersonal relationships in adulthood. This was achieved by testing four research questions that examined the different facets of interpersonal relationships and social support across the lifespan. The hypothesis for this study was that maltreated individuals would have greater difficulty in developing high-quality role models and relationships, and would thus have lower quality ones. The results showed a significant difference in relationship quality and social support between the maltreated individuals and the control group; meaning that the maltreated individuals were found to have lower quality relationships.

Implications

This study carries with it a few implications. One such implication is that lower social support in childhood may be a predictor of continued lower relationship qualities later in life. Perhaps the lack of social support in childhood could lead to the inability to create stable and consistent relationships as the individual grows older due to not learning how to foster

relationships. The maltreatment the individuals face could also cause a warped perception of how relationships are supposed to work, leading to a resistance to relationships building. Whatever the case, it is important for interventions to be put in place for these individuals so that they may learn to create stable, consistent relationships in their lives.

There is also a possibility that while the social support and romantic relationship quality are *perceived* to be lower, they may not actually be. As this is self-report data, the relationship qualities are all based on the participants perception. Therefore, individuals may perceive the quality of their relationships to be lower than they actually are. This could be for a multitude of reasons; due to the maltreatment faced, participants may be primed to expect relationships to be lower quality, or they may be unconsciously guarded in their relationships and thus perceive this as lower quality relationships. Further research should be done in order to explore these possibilities.

Limitations and Future Directions

That said, there were some limitations in this study. Due to the fact that this study worked off of archival data, the research questions were limited to what was available from the previous research. This was limiting in that there was not much freedom to look at all possible points of interest, and could only examine the factors examined in the original study. It would have been interesting to be able to look at forms of maltreatment such as verbal abuse or emotional neglect, which was not possible in this current study.

This was also self-report data, and while the maltreatment cases themselves were court-substantiated, there was no substantiation beyond the participants to account for the relationship qualities. This means that there was a possible bias in the questionnaire responses

and they were not completely accurate to the actual quality of the relationships. In a future study, it would be important to figure out a way to try and mitigate any potential self-report biases.

Another limitation is the fact that these cases were court-substantiated. This means that the maltreatments experienced were enough to require some form of legal intervention and had gone before a court. This is a limitation because the study only looked at those who were found out and legitimized by law enforcement, and does not include individuals who experienced maltreatment that did not go before the courts. While court-substantiated cases are highly relevant and important to look into, it would be important to understand how those who did not receive legal intervention are affected by the maltreatments they have faced as those are the individuals who have likely had a significant impact on their relationship development abilities.

This study did not have any kind of measure for what the participants' social support was like before they were abused and/or neglected. Therefore, we cannot truly determine causality. This means that the participants could have already had low social support before any form of maltreatment began. Despite this research being framed as directional, it cannot be said that these results are truly directional and there is a chance that the relationship goes the other way.

The final limitation on this study, which was briefly mentioned previously, is the fact that there was only three specific forms of maltreatment examined. This study only looked at physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Neglect was not specified to any specific form, but court-substantiated cases typically align most closely with physical neglect, in that the parent has failed to provide the child with suitable food, shelter, and medical care. These forms of abuse and neglect of course have significant impact upon the child, but they are not the only forms that

are out there. It would be important to look into the ways that other forms of abuse and neglect have an impact on an individual.

Moving forward, it would be important to apply these findings. With this evidence of there being a significant difference in the quality of relationships for maltreated individuals, whether by their own perception or by a real and true difference, interventions should be put in place in order to try and alleviate these differences. This could be done through various forms of therapy, or perhaps by creating new guidelines by which law enforcement works under to legitimize maltreatment cases in order to try and get people out of those situations quicker and easier. It would also be important to, as previously stated, look at other forms of maltreatment in future research. This would be important because it would be good to have a more comprehensive understanding of how all the different types of maltreatment could affect an individuals relationship cultivation in order to provide them with the best support possible. It would also be good because this would allow an understanding of what forms of maltreatment have the most significant effect, and is thus the most detrimental to this aspect of development. Future research could also benefit from looking at non court-substantiated cases of maltreatment. Having an understanding of how those who experienced maltreatment at varying degrees of severity that went unreported or unsubstantiated for varying amounts of time would be extremely important. This would also provide the ability to understand how those who are maltreated at ages older than 12 are affected. While ages younger than 12 are highly formative years, it would be incorrect to say that the teenage years are also massively important developmental times, and experiencing maltreatment during and/or throughout these times is likely to have a significant

impact on a person, one that it would be important to understand the repercussions of. It is highly suggested that these factors all be taken into consideration and implemented in future research.

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