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## Childhood maltreatment and perceived stress in young adults: The role of emotion regulation strategies, self-efficacy, and resilience

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### ABSTRACT

Childhood maltreatment has many deleterious outcomes; however, trait resilience as well as emotion regulation strategies, including suppression and reappraisal, may mediate between childhood maltreatment and later perceived stress. For this study, 267 college students (183 females and 84 males;  $M$  age = 19.77,  $SD$  = 2.29) completed self-report measures of parental psychological and physical maltreatment, parental emotion neglect, habitual use of suppression and reappraisal strategies, emotion regulation self-efficacy, trait resilience, and recent perceived stress. Analyses were conducted to investigate gender-specific associations. In females, both suppression and reappraisal mediated the relationship between maternal/paternal emotional neglect and perceived stress, and suppression also mediated the relationship between maternal psychological maltreatment and perceived stress. Trait resilience mediated the relationships of all three types of maternal maltreatment, paternal psychological maltreatment, and paternal emotional neglect with perceived stress in females. There were no significant mediation effects in males. Thus, interventions aiming at reducing perceived stress associated with maternal or paternal emotional neglect or maternal psychological maltreatment in women may benefit from targeting both suppression and reappraisal. Such interventions may also be enhanced by efforts to strengthen trait resilience.

### 1. Introduction

Past research has shown that childhood maltreatment may result in greater sensitivity to stress and higher perceived stress in adulthood (e.g., Hager & Runtz, 2012; Hyman, Paliwal, & Sinha, 2007) and efforts are underway to identify underlying mechanisms in that relationship. There is some evidence that habitual use of emotion regulation strategies, including suppression (aims at inhibiting ongoing emotion) and reappraisal (aims at changing a situation cognitively) are associated, either positively (in the case of suppression) or negatively (in the case of reappraisal), with later psychopathology (see reviews by Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweitzer, 2010; Hu et al., 2014); however, there appears to have been little or no research exploring the potential indirect effect of childhood maltreatment (from both mothers and fathers separately) on perceived stress via suppression and reappraisal in females and males separately.

Research has also shown that the effect of habitual use of emotion regulation strategies on psychopathology is partially dependent

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on individuals' emotion regulation self-efficacy – that is, on how effective individuals believe they can be in implementing emotion regulating strategies (Goldin, Manber-Ball, Werner, Heimberg, & Gross, 2009, 2012). Thus, tests of the indirect effect of childhood maltreatment on perceived stress in young adults via emotion regulation strategies might be enhanced by including tests of the potential interaction effect of emotion regulation self-efficacy and strategies on perceived stress.

Past research has also indicated that trait resilience (a personality trait that contains a cluster of personality characteristics such as personal competence and acceptance of self and life) can be a protective factor in relation to later psychopathology (e.g., Collishaw et al., 2007; Edward, 2005; Graham-Bermann, Gruber, Howell, & Girz, 2009; Hjemdal, Friborg, Stiles, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2006). For example, some studies showed that resilience mediated the relationship between parental psychological maltreatment and emotional problems in adolescents and also counteracted the tendency of individuals with a maltreatment history to suffer from later depression (Arslan, 2016; Seok et al., 2012; Wingo et al., 2010). Using a gender-specific analytic approach in a retrospective study of college students, Ashy, Yu, Gutowski, Samkavitz, and Malley-Morrison (2017) found that both maternal psychological maltreatment and paternal physical maltreatment were predictive of total psychiatric symptomatology in adulthood, with shame mediating the relationship in women and guilt mediating it in men, limbic system symptoms mediating the relationship in both genders. However, few studies have examined the extent to which later vulnerability to perceived stress following childhood maltreatment may be mediated by trait resilience in distinct male and female models. The current study aims at filling this gap.

### 1.1. Childhood maltreatment and perceived stress

Several studies have shown that individuals with a history of childhood maltreatment tend to show a decreased ability to modulate and tolerate aversive emotional states (e.g., see review by Cicchetti & Toth, 2005), and higher levels of perceived stress (Hager & Runtz, 2012; Hyman et al., 2007). There is also evidence that childhood experience of harsh parenting, early adversity, and childhood maltreatment (such as emotional and physical maltreatment) may affect stress coping styles and alter neurological responses to stress (Bugental, 2004; Heim & Nemeroff, 2001; Thabet, Tischer, & Vostanis, 2004). For example, Hager and Runtz (2012) found that physical and psychological maltreatment were associated with perceived stress in adults. Cook, Chaplin, Sinha, Tebes, and Mayes (2012) found that adolescents who experienced less childhood maltreatment reported less perceived stress and fewer problems at school than those who experienced more childhood maltreatment. In a retrospective, cross-sectional study, Vranceanu, Hobfoll, and Johnson (2007) found that scores on a measure combining multiple forms of childhood maltreatment were positively associated with increased life stress in adult women. However, it appears that no study has examined the extent to which different forms of childhood maltreatment, including psychological and physical maltreatment and emotional neglect from mothers and fathers separately, contribute to later perceived stress.

### 1.2. Emotion regulation strategies and self-efficacy

Emotion regulation, defined by Gross and John (2003, p.282) as “the process by which we influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how we experience and express them,” has been linked to a variety of later mental health problems (Aldao et al., 2010; Berking & Wupperman, 2012). According to Gross's process model of emotion regulation, emotion can be regulated at five different points in regard to any event: selection of the situation, modification of the situation, deployment of attention, change of cognitions, and modulation of the situation. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation, such as cognitive reappraisal, acts early in the emotion generation process and aims at changing a situation cognitively (e.g., Gross, 2002). Response-focused strategies, such as expressive suppression, act later in the emotion generation process and aim at modifying emotional responses after they have been triggered.

Past research showed significant associations between emotion regulation strategies and psychopathology (see reviews by Aldao et al., 2010, and Hu et al., 2014). For example, reappraisal was found to be positively correlated with favorable health outcomes, such as life satisfaction and positive affect (Hu et al., 2014) and negatively associated with psychopathologies, such as alexithymia (e.g., Chen, Xu, Jing, & Chan, 2011; Swart, Kortekaas, & Aleman, 2009). Suppression has been found to be associated with several internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown, & Hofmann, 2006; Llewellyn, Dolcos, Lordan, Rudolph, & Dolcos, 2013; O'Mahen, Karl, Moberly, & Fedock, 2015), and maladaptive behaviors, such as substance abuse (e.g., Fucito, Juliano, & Toll, 2010). In general, reappraisal is viewed as an adaptive emotion regulation strategy while suppression is viewed as a maladaptive strategy.

There is some evidence that experiencing certain forms of parental psychological and physical maltreatment or neglect during childhood can undermine children's development of effective emotion regulation skills and promote ineffective emotion regulation strategies with a long-term influence on mental health (Briere & Jordan, 2009; Hagan et al., 2017; Jennissen, Holl, Mai, Wolff, & Barnow, 2016; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Spasojević & Alloy, 2002; Stevens et al., 2013). For example, Buckholdt, Parra, and Jobe-Shields (2014) found that adolescents' self-reported perceptions of parent invalidation of emotions through punishment or neglect was associated with emotion dysregulation. O'Mahen et al. (2015) found that childhood emotional neglect was associated with maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as behavioral avoidance and rumination. However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the mediating role of suppression and reappraisal between multiple types of childhood maltreatment and perceived stress.

Previous studies have also shown that emotion regulation self-efficacy beliefs – that is, beliefs that one can successfully implement suppression and reappraisal strategies when desiring to regulate one's emotions (Goldin et al., 2009, 2012) – are associated with fewer negative emotional outcomes and psychopathological symptoms (e.g., Thomasson & Psouni, 2010). For example, by

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