



Linkages between childhood emotional abuse and marital satisfaction: The mediating role of empathic accuracy for hostile emotions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research linking childhood emotional abuse (CEA) and adult marital satisfaction has focused on individuals without sufficient attention to couple processes. Less attention has also been paid to the effects of CEA on the ability to read other's emotions, and how this may be related to satisfaction in intimate relationships. In this study, 156 couples reported on histories of CEA, marital satisfaction and empathic accuracy of their partners' positive and hostile emotions during discussion of conflicts in their relationships. Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling was used to examine links between CEA and marital satisfaction, with empathic accuracy as a potential mediator. Both men's and women's CEA histories were linked not only with their own lower marital satisfaction but also with their partners' lower satisfaction. Empathic accuracy for hostile emotions mediated the link between women's CEA and their satisfaction and their partners' satisfaction in the relationship. Findings suggest that a history of CEA is associated with difficulties with empathic accuracy, and that empathic inaccuracy in part mediates the association between CEA and adult marital dissatisfaction.

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Introduction

Childhood maltreatment has been the focus of much research in recent decades, and the effects it has in adulthood are well documented (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008). Clinical experience and empirical research point to serious interpersonal consequences of childhood maltreatment. Individuals with histories of abuse have been shown to experience more unstable and less satisfying intimate relationships than those without abuse histories (Godbout, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2009; Maneta, Cohen, Schulz, & Waldinger, 2012). Multiple explanations have been proposed to explain this link (Alexander, 2003; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Polusny & Follette, 1995), but the mechanisms by which childhood maltreatment influences adult relationships are incompletely understood.

Researchers have found that emotional maltreatment of children – that is, belittling, degrading, intimidating behaviors by caregivers directed toward children – is common (DiLillo & Long, 1999; Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009) and is associated with negative interpersonal sequelae in adulthood (Wright, 2007). According to the U.S. Department of Health

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and Human Services (2013), 57,880 U.S. children experienced emotional abuse in 2012. Childhood emotional abuse often co-occurs with sexual and/or physical abuse (Wright et al., 2009); however, emotional abuse may be more detrimental when compared to these other forms of abuse because it is usually more pervasive (Wright, 2007). One hypothesis explaining the link between emotional abuse and later interpersonal difficulties is that emotional abuse may hamper children's ability to express their own emotions clearly and to read others' emotions accurately. These difficulties can result in problems in intimate relationships later in life. The purpose of this study is to examine the association between histories of childhood emotional abuse and current satisfaction with adult intimate relationships and to test whether the ability to accurately read a partner's negative emotions mediates this link.

Emotional Abuse and Marital Satisfaction

Most studies on childhood maltreatment have focused on the effects of physical and sexual abuse, but accumulating research links childhood emotional abuse (also referred to as *psychological maltreatment*) with negative psychological and social sequelae in adulthood (Wright et al., 2009). Briere and Rickards (2007) examined 620 individuals and found that exposure to emotional abuse during childhood was associated with interpersonal conflict and concerns about abandonment. Childhood emotional abuse has also been shown to be the strongest predictor of adult emotion dysregulation compared to other forms of abuse (Burns, Jackson, & Harding, 2010).

Clinical observations and research evidence also converge in documenting the detrimental effects of childhood emotional abuse on later functioning in intimate relationships. Perry and colleagues (Perry, DiLillo, & Peugh, 2007) found an association between a history of childhood psychological maltreatment and marital satisfaction in newlywed couples. DiLillo and colleagues (2009) measured the links between childhood maltreatment and marital satisfaction over a 2-year period in a large sample of couples and found that childhood emotional abuse was associated with lower marital satisfaction concurrently and during follow-up assessments. In addition, they found an association between childhood emotional abuse and lower marital trust. Difficulties with trust within an intimate relationship have been associated with both childhood maltreatment and marital dissatisfaction (DiLillo & Long, 1999). Bradbury and Shaffer (2012) also identified associations between childhood emotional abuse and adult relationship satisfaction and found that emotion regulation difficulties resulting from exposure to emotional abuse, including difficulties with emotional awareness, mediated this link.

To date, theoretical frameworks used to explain why victims of childhood abuse have interpersonal difficulties have focused primarily on intra-psycho changes, such as disrupted attachment, shame, feelings of betrayal, and loss of trust that result from early maltreatment. For example, Messman-Moore and Coates (2007) found that the link between childhood psychological maltreatment and conflict in adult relationships among 382 college women was partly explained by maladaptive internalized schemas that created strong sensitivity to violations of trust, abandonment and experiences of shame. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that childhood abuse not only leads to alterations in the way the self is perceived (e.g., shame about one's behavior) but also affects one's perceptions of others and their behavior (Waldinger, Toth, & Gerber, 2001). Distortions in the perception of both self and others have important implications for the development of empathic understanding in intimate relationships.

Emotional Abuse and Empathic Accuracy

One of the most robust correlates of childhood emotional abuse is a negative cognitive attributional style (Gibb, 2002; Rose & Abramson, 1992), which can impair one's ability to read other's emotions accurately and lead to misperceptions of affectively salient behaviors and events. Attributions stem from our attempts to understand the causes of events (Heider, 1958), and early maltreatment has been shown to influence one's attributional style (Buser & Hackney, 2012; Chen, Coccaro, Lee, & Jacobson, 2012). Research to date has focused on the effects of childhood emotional abuse on negative cognitive styles mostly as they pertain to deleterious evaluations about oneself (Gibb & Abela, 2008). Little attention has been paid, however, to how childhood emotional abuse may impact the way individuals perceive others' emotions and emotionally salient behaviors, particularly in the context of challenging interactions.

Attributions about the other in interpersonal relationships have been linked with one's empathic accuracy (Schweinkle, Ickes, & Bernstein, 2002; Sillars, Smith, & Koerner, 2010). Misperceptions stemming from histories of childhood emotional abuse are likely to limit individuals' ability to accurately read their partners' emotions. Misreading may be particularly likely and consequential during emotionally charged moments (Carrère, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000; Waldinger & Schulz, 2006), making the resolution of tensions between partners even more challenging.

Exposure to emotional abuse may also affect individuals' awareness of their own emotions (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012) and make it harder to acknowledge and express their emotional state. This can, in turn, affect empathic accuracy as empathy is a two-way or dyadic process that depends not only on one's ability to read the other's emotions but also on the other's ability to appropriately express emotions (Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008).

Empathic Accuracy and Marital Satisfaction

The ability of partners to read each other's emotions accurately has been shown to have implications for their satisfaction within the relationship (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001). Some research has shown that empathic accuracy particularly for a

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