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The role of attachment in the relationship between child maltreatment and later emotional and behavioral functioning

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ABSTRACT

The experience of childhood maltreatment is an important predictor of unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes. Because little research examined explanatory variables in the relationship between childhood maltreatment experiences and later outcomes, this study examined the role that attachment serves in this relationship. Four hundred twenty-four participants completed questionnaires assessing the variables of interest for this study. Results indicated that both childhood maltreatment experiences (particularly emotional abuse) and attachment (particularly to mothers and peers) are significant predictors of later emotional and behavioral outcomes. Further, attachment contributed unique and significant variance to the relationship between childhood maltreatment experiences and later outcomes. Such findings suggested that secure attachment may serve as a protective factor against maladaptive emotional and behavioral outcomes as children reach emerging adulthood, even in the context of childhood maltreatment experiences. The importance of studying the relationships among these variables is discussed.

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Childhood maltreatment is an important predictor in the etiology of a multitude of unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Carr & Francis, 2009; Clemmons, DiLillo, Martinez, DeGue, & Jeffcott, 2003; Clemmons, Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2007; Gross & Keller, 1992; Higgins & McCabe, 2000; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, & Romans, 1996; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Tyrka, Wyche, Kelly, Price, & Carpenter, 2009). For example, multiple childhood maltreatment experiences were predictive of more severe post-traumatic stress symptoms, with the interaction between multiple childhood maltreatment experiences and the severity of these maltreatment experiences being a stronger predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms than either of these characteristics alone (Clemmons et al., 2007). Certainly, a direct relationship between childhood maltreatment experiences and later outcomes has been documented consistently; however, there are likely many variables that may help to explain this relationship.

One explanatory variable that may prove important is attachment. For example, research suggested that there are relationships between childhood maltreatment experiences and individuals' attachment styles post-abuse (e.g., Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009; Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2006) and between individuals' attachment styles and their emotional and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bowlby, 1979; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Erickson, Sroufe,

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& Egeland, 1985; Fortuna & Roisman, 2008; Marchand-Reilly, 2009). Although these specific relationships were noted, few studies examined collective relationships among childhood maltreatment experiences, attachment, and later emotional and behavioral functioning, even though such relationships may provide vital knowledge for interventions intended to treat unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes. As a result, the current study examined these relationships.

Childhood maltreatment

Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011) suggested that an estimated 676,569 children were victims of abuse and neglect in 2011. Of these children, 78.5% were victims of neglect, 17.6% were victims of physical abuse, 9.1% were victims of sexual abuse, and 9.0% were victims of psychological maltreatment (i.e., emotional abuse and neglect; these figures do not total 100% as some children in this sample experienced multiple forms of abuse). Victimization rates for both sexes were nearly equally represented (48.7% boys and 50.8% girls; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). These estimates suggested that childhood maltreatment experiences are widespread and that there is a need to understand the long-term outcomes that result from these serious experiences.

Unfortunately, gaining such an understanding may be difficult because various studies may utilize different definitions of childhood maltreatment. For example, both federal and state laws provide definitions for childhood maltreatment. At the federal level, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) provides a broad set of minimum criteria that each state must incorporate into its statutory definitions of childhood maltreatment. These minimum criteria suggested that childhood maltreatment should encompass “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, p. 1). Nonetheless, childhood maltreatment often is defined more broadly within the research literature. Further, to fully understand the correlates of such adverse childhood experiences, it should be noted that childhood maltreatment experiences may be related differentially with attachment and later emotional and behavioral outcomes.

The relationship between childhood maltreatment experiences and later outcomes

With such high incidences of childhood maltreatment experiences, research has closely examined the myriad short-term and long-term outcomes that can be promoted by such experiences. In fact, studies documented high rates of comorbid psychiatric disorders in individuals who had childhood maltreatment experiences. For example, in one study, researchers reported that 80% of men who were maltreated physically, 58.3% of women who were maltreated physically, and 69.6% of women who were maltreated sexually met criteria for multiple *DSM-III-R* psychiatric disorders (Silverman et al., 1996). Additionally, age of onset was related to the long-term outcomes of those who had childhood maltreatment experiences. In particular, earlier age of onset was predictive of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety and depression) in adulthood, whereas later age of onset was predictive of externalizing problems (e.g., alcohol abuse, Antisocial Personality Disorder) in adulthood (Kaplow & Widom, 2007).

Thus, overall, adults who had childhood maltreatment experiences tended to report difficulties across a variety of domains, including both internalizing and externalizing problems (Silverman et al., 1996). Nonetheless, research examining the long-term outcomes of childhood maltreatment experiences also suggested that certain symptoms appear to be relatively common in those individuals who had such experiences. For example, findings suggested that men and women who had childhood maltreatment experiences tend to exhibit more symptoms of depression, anxiety, withdrawal, anger, somatization, and suicidal ideation relative to individuals who did not have childhood maltreatment experiences (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988; Gross & Keller, 1992; Silverman et al., 1996; Springer et al., 2007). Further, relative to their non-maltreated counterparts, adults who had childhood maltreatment experiences exhibited externalizing symptoms (e.g., attention problems, delinquent behavior, aggressive behavior) in both adolescence and young adulthood (Silverman et al., 1996). Certainly, childhood maltreatment experiences were related to unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes.

The potential role of attachment

Although research documented clearly that childhood maltreatment experiences and unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes are related, a clearer understanding of the mechanisms that may explain this relationship is needed. Further, although childhood maltreatment experiences clearly predicted poorer outcomes, not all individuals who had childhood maltreatment experiences had unfavorable emotional and behavioral outcomes. Consistently, Wright (2007) suggested that, because previous research focused on simply documenting the damaging impact of childhood maltreatment experiences, researchers must now examine the possible explanations for long-term negative outcomes. Thus, research examining the relationship between childhood maltreatment experiences and later outcomes discussed the mediating role of a multitude of factors (e.g., Hankin, 2005; Roche, Runtz, & Hunter, 1999; Scarpa, Haden, & Abercromby, 2010). Of particular interest in the current study is the role of attachment in this relationship.

Generally, most children tend to develop secure attachment in response to being parented well enough (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In general, attachment behaviors are most noticeable when young children are left alone

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