



## Research article

# Links between posttrauma appraisals and trauma-related distress in adolescent females from the child welfare system<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Research on predictors of trauma-related distress in youth has tended to focus on trauma exposure and individual difference characteristics. This study extends previous research by examining the role of posttrauma appraisals in predicting trauma-related distress in a sample of female adolescents with current or prior involvement in the child welfare system and a history of maltreatment. Participants' posttrauma appraisals accounted for unique variance in trauma-related distress, above and beyond key trauma exposure and individual difference variables. Further, posttrauma appraisals of alienation accounted for unique variance in posttraumatic stress, dissociation, and depression symptom severity, and posttrauma appraisals of shame accounted for unique variance in posttraumatic stress symptom severity. These results suggest that posttrauma appraisals may represent an important predictor of trauma-related distress for youth with current or prior involvement in the child welfare system. They also replicate findings in youth and adult literature on interpersonal trauma, lending further support to the existence of specific pathways between certain appraisals and various forms of trauma-related distress. We discuss the implications of our study for trauma-informed practice within the child welfare system.

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## Introduction

Nationwide epidemiological data from the United States document that youth exposed to interpersonal trauma are at increased risk for adverse mental health outcomes (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Youth involved in the child welfare system (CWS) demonstrate even higher risk for adverse mental health outcomes than the general population; by definition, they have experienced at least one, and typically multiple, incidents of interpersonal traumatic events that precipitate removal from the home (Ko et al., 2008). For CWS-involved youth, the most frequent types of interpersonal trauma include neglect, family violence, traumatic grief/separation, physical abuse, and emotional abuse; and the most prevalent adverse mental health outcomes include forms of psychological distress such as posttraumatic stress, depression, internalizing, and externalizing symptoms (Dorsey et al., 2012; Greeson et al., 2011; Kisiel, Fehrenbach, Small, & Lyons, 2009; Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009). We hereafter refer to these and other forms of psychological distress following trauma as *trauma-related distress*, as this term encompasses distress beyond simply posttraumatic stress symptoms.

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Research on predictors of trauma-related distress among CWS-involved youth has tended to focus on predictors that relate to characteristics of trauma exposure or individual difference characteristics. For example, findings have shown that the following trauma exposure factors are associated with greater trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth: exposure to multiple (versus single) occurrences of trauma; exposure to multiple types (versus single type) of trauma, also referred to as complex trauma exposure or poly-victimization; chronic (versus acute or short-term) trauma exposure; or trauma perpetrated by a caregiver or close other (versus a stranger) (Greeson et al., 2011; Kisiel et al., 2009). Abuse by a caregiver or close other—also known as childhood betrayal trauma—has been linked with more severe dissociative symptoms in youth as well (Chu & DePrince, 2006). Additionally, several individual difference characteristics have been found to be associated with greater trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth, including female sex, adolescent (versus child) age group, and ethnic minority status (Greeson et al., 2011). Critically missing from the literature on predictors of trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth is consideration of the role of *posttrauma appraisals*.

#### *Prior Research on Posttrauma Appraisals and Trauma-Related Distress*

Posttrauma appraisals refer to cognitive, affective, and emotional states that arise from and are consciously identified and differentiated by the individual in the course of processing and making sense or meaning of the traumatic event and its sequelae (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1987). For example, a CWS-involved female adolescent with prior exposure to sexual abuse by her father may reflect on her experience and endorse appraisals of shame or guilt. Researchers have increasingly indicated the importance of exploring posttrauma appraisals alongside more traditional predictors of trauma-related distress such as trauma exposure and individual difference characteristics (DePrince, Chu, & Pineda, 2011; Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Foa, Ehlers, Clark, Tolin, & Orsillo, 1999).

While virtually no research specifically explores links between posttrauma appraisals and trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth, a burgeoning body of literature in adult interpersonal trauma, and a more limited but emerging body of literature in youth interpersonal trauma, has begun to document evidence of these links. The literature on adults exposed to different forms of interpersonal trauma has shown links between shame appraisals and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Andrews, Brewin, Rose, & Kirk, 2000; Beck et al., 2011; La Bash & Papa, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011); self-blame appraisals and depression symptoms (Flicker, Cerulli, Swogger, & Talbot, 2012; Hassija & Gray, 2012; Hazzard, 1993; Kaysen, Scher, Mastnak, & Resick, 2005); betrayal appraisals and dissociation symptoms (DePrince et al., 2011; Smith & Freyd, 2013); and alienation appraisals and posttraumatic stress symptoms (DePrince et al., 2011). Among youth exposed to interpersonal trauma, research has shown links between self-blame appraisals and posttraumatic stress, dissociation, and depression symptoms (Daigneault, Tourigny, & Hebert, 2006; Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1998); self-blame appraisals and internalizing symptoms (Kerig, 1998); guilt appraisals and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Kletter, Weems, & Carrion, 2009); and shame appraisals and depression symptoms (Feiring et al., 1998). Literature in both adult and youth interpersonal trauma thus suggests the potential relevance of a wide range of appraisals including betrayal, self-blame, alienation, and shame, associated with different forms of trauma-related distress including posttraumatic stress, dissociation, and depression symptoms.

#### *Exploring Posttrauma Appraisals*

Posttrauma appraisals represent a potentially important, but thus far neglected, predictor of trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth. Exploring the role of posttrauma appraisals among CWS-involved youth may help identify new avenues for understanding risk and intervention in this group at elevated risk for negative mental health outcomes. As compared with the youth population at large, or even with specific youth victim populations, CWS-involved youth represent a special and more vulnerable subpopulation, typically having experienced a wider range of trauma types as well as added stressors of removal from the home and possibility of multiple placements/displacements in terms of residence, school, and peer group (Ko et al., 2008). The potentially unique experience of CWS involvement suggests additional and particular importance to exploring the role of posttrauma appraisals for this youth population. Furthermore, greater understanding of the role of posttrauma appraisals could improve the quality of trauma-informed care for CWS-involved youth, directing attention to targeting and addressing relevant appraisals in evidence-based mental health treatment.

#### *Current Study*

The current study had two main goals: (a) to expand research on predictors of trauma-related distress in CWS-involved youth beyond the traditional focus on trauma exposure and individual difference characteristics to consideration of posttrauma appraisals; and (b) to explore the nature of appraisal-distress links in a youth population. To meet these goals, the study considered links between posttrauma appraisals and trauma-related distress in a sample of female adolescents with current or prior involvement in the CWS and a history of abuse or neglect. Based on the reviewed literature and study constraints, we considered a wide range of six different *posttrauma appraisals*, including betrayal, self-blame, fear, alienation, anger, and shame; and three different forms of *trauma-related distress*, including posttraumatic stress, dissociation, and depression symptom severity. In line with the first goal, we tested whether adolescents' posttrauma appraisals following a traumatic event accounted for variance in trauma-related distress, above and beyond key trauma exposure and individual difference characteristics. In line with the second goal, we examined which posttrauma appraisals were associated with

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