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## Research article

# Religiosity and interpersonal problems explain individual differences in self esteem among young adults with child maltreatment experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment can have a lasting impact, which is why it is important to understand factors that may exacerbate or mitigate self-esteem difficulties in adulthood. Although there is tremendous benefit that can come from religion and spirituality, few studies examine religious views after child maltreatment. Subsequent interpersonal difficulties may also affect self-esteem in maltreatment survivors. This study sought to examine interpersonal problems and religiosity as mediators in the link between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem in adulthood. The study recruited 718 women ( $M = 19.53$  years) from a large public university. Participants completed questionnaires related to child abuse and neglect, interpersonal problems, religiosity, and self-esteem. Results demonstrated that all forms of maltreatment were associated with negative views of God and with more interpersonal difficulties. Viewing God as a punishing figure mediated the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and low adult self-esteem, along with several areas associated with interpersonal problems. Further, for both child emotional neglect and physical abuse, viewing God as less supportive mediated the relationship between child maltreatment and low adult self-esteem. The results may help in intervention for child maltreatment survivors by increasing awareness of the importance of religiosity in treatment to self-esteem issues in both childhood and adulthood.

Child maltreatment remains a public health issue in the United States and throughout the world. In 2012, 3.4 million child referrals to child protective services occurred for some form of child abuse or neglect (CDC, 2014). Child neglect and emotional abuse are the most common types of child maltreatment, with 78% of reported child survivors in 2012 being cases of neglect (CDC, 2014). Historically, however, emotional abuse and neglect are the least studied (DePanfilis, 2006), whereas child physical and sexual abuse are examined more often. All forms of child maltreatment include both short and long-term difficulties, such as low self-esteem, interpersonal problems, higher revictimization rates, health problems, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Borger et al., 2005; Jumper, 1995; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006; Waldron, Scarpa, Kim-Spoon, & Coe, 2016). The current study focuses on maladaptive self-views among individuals who experienced child maltreatment and examine whether the link between child maltreatment and low self-esteem may be explained by disrupted social and divine relations, represented by interpersonal problems and religiosity, respectively. In particular, religious individuals may construct divine relations, engaging a divine other in a quest for solace and guidance (Ellison, 1991), which are likely to bolster their sense of personal meaning, religious identity, and moral commitments (Furrow et al., 2004).

Cole and Putnam (1992) noted that child abuse disrupts both the “self” and “other.” That is, child maltreatment causes self-esteem difficulties, affect problems, and behavioral issues. Additionally, child abuse interferes with the ability to form social bonds, usually

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because of trust issues. In fact, exposure to any form of trauma will have a negative effect on interpersonal functioning (Beck, Grant, Clapp, & Palyo, 2009). Cicchetti and Toth (2005) found that early maltreatment could damage healthy attachments and social processing. With the once healthy attachments gone, there may now be pervasive social disruption throughout the lifespan. Briere and Rickards (2007) found that child sexual abuse significantly predicted a significantly altered self-identity as well as relatedness issues, linked to increased idealization-disillusionment, abandonment concerns, susceptibility to influence and affect dysregulation. Child sexual abuse was also found to disrupt the ability to generate realistic appraisals of the self and of others, hindering the ability to form accurate and whole images of the self and others (Callahan & Hilsenroth, 2005). Moreover, there is a link between childhood sexual abuse and deficient romantic relationship formation as well as difficulty with sexual functioning in adolescence and adulthood (Beitchman et al., 1991). Abused children will likely have poorer social relationships, poorer sexual relationships, and more interpersonal conflicts when compared to non-abused peers (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Watkins & Bentovim, 1992). Clearly, child maltreatment may result in interpersonal problems, which in turn may impede the development of positive views of self.

In the extant child maltreatment literature, religiosity has been identified as a crucial protective factor against the detrimental effects of child maltreatment (Kim, 2008). Religiosity is defined as a number of dimensions related to religious beliefs and involvement in religious practices (Bergan & McConatha, 2000). This could include one's views of God or a higher power. Religion has a major role in American life, with approximately 82% of Americans saying that religion had a degree of importance in their lives (Pew, 2013). Relevant to the trauma literature, an increase in religiosity may protect trauma survivors from shattered assumptions and difficulties associated with trauma and victimization (Kulie & Ehring, 2014). Indeed, it was found that higher religiosity produced fewer trauma symptoms, even when controlling for perceived social support (Harris, Erbes, Engdahl, Winkowski, & Nguyen, 2014).

Although religiosity seems to have beneficial effects for adjustment in child maltreatment survivors, prior research has reported that individuals experiencing child maltreatment are less likely to practice religion. Such findings may be explained by the correspondence hypothesis (Granqvist & Dickie, 2005), which proposes that individuals who have experienced secure vs. insecure childhood attachments have established the foundations on which a corresponding relationship with God could be built. According to this view, maltreated individuals, who are more likely to have insecure attachment relationships with their primary attachment figures, are less likely to view God as loving and caring compared to nonmaltreated individuals. In contrast, the compensation hypothesis (Granqvist & Dickie, 2005) predicts that individuals with insecure childhood attachment may be more likely to seek God for compensatory attachment relationships. Consistent with the correspondence hypothesis, empirical studies have reported negative effects of child maltreatment on religiosity demonstrating that survivors of abuse tend to have more negative views on God (e.g., Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Kennedy & Drebing, 2002). In particular, Bierman (2005) examined the effects of physical and emotional abuse on religiosity among adults and found that abuse perpetrated by fathers during childhood was related to low levels of religiosity. It is plausible that the image of God as a father led survivors of abusive fathers to distance themselves from religion. However, there is also evidence that maltreated and nonmaltreated children did not differ in their view of God as kind and close, although maltreated children perceived their parents as less kind and more wrathful than did nonmaltreated children (Johnson & Eastburg, 1992). Work is needed to understand the unique role of religiosity in child maltreatment survivors.

## 1. Current study

Despite the potential benefits of religiosity, relatively few studies have examined religiosity after child maltreatment. In addition, previous research has primarily focused on physical and sexual abuse and studies examining the impact of child emotional abuse and neglect are rare. Considering the lasting impact of child maltreatment, it is important to understand factors that may exacerbate or mitigate self-esteem difficulties. This study sought to examine interpersonal problems and religiosity—representing social and divine relations, respectively— as mediators in the relationship between child abuse and neglect and self-esteem in adult women. Women were used due to the higher rates of child sexual abuse and comparable rates of child physical abuse when compared to men (Briere & Elliot, 2003). It was expected that various forms of child abuse and neglect would predict lower adult self-esteem and that this relationship would be explained by individual differences in interpersonal problems and religiosity.

## 2. Method

The current study included 718 women at a large public university (*Mean Age* = 19.53 years, *SD* = 1.84). The women reported their ethnicity/race as Caucasian (80.8%), Asian (9.7%), African-American (3.5%), Hispanic (2.8%), Other (2.4%), and Unreported (0.8%). Participants reported their religion as Protestants (32.7%), Roman Catholics (25.5%), Jewish (1.67%), Muslim (1.25%), None (21.0%), and Unreported (17.8%).

## 3. Measures

### 3.1. *The childhood trauma questionnaire – short form (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 2003)*

The CTQ is a 25-item inventory of five types of childhood trauma: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. The CTQ uses a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Very Often True), with scores summed. Each subscale consists of 5 items, with higher scores indicating greater child maltreatment within the specific domain. The definition of child abuse is consistent with federal guidelines described in the [Child Welfare Information Gateway \(2013\)](#). Specifically, physical

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