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Are emotions controllable? Maltreated and non-maltreated youth's implicit beliefs about emotion and aggressive tendencies

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ABSTRACT

Although child maltreatment places youth at substantial risk for difficulties with emotion regulation and aggression, not all maltreated youth show these adverse effects, raising important questions about characteristics that discriminate those who do versus do not evidence long-term negative outcomes. The present investigation examined whether implicit beliefs about emotion moderated the association between maltreatment and aggression. Maltreated (n = 59) and community-matched (n = 66) youth were asked regarding their beliefs about emotion and aggressive behaviors. Beliefs about emotion were more strongly associated with aggression among maltreated youth, particularly physically abused youth. Maltreated youth who believed they had poor ability to control emotion reported significantly higher levels of aggression than comparison youth. However, maltreated youth who believed they had high ability to control emotion did not differ significantly in aggression from that of comparison youth. Findings offer unique insight into a factor that may increase or buffer maltreated youth's risk for aggression and thus highlight potential directions for interventions to reduce aggressive tendencies.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment constitutes one of the most serious violations of children's needs and well-being, the consequences of which extend across virtually all domains of functioning (Cicchetti, 2013; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995). One such consequence, which emerges in early childhood and persists well into adulthood, involves ineffective regulation of emotions (Burns, Jackson, & Harding, 2010; Cummings, Hennessy, & Rabideau, 1994; Kim-Spoon, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2013; Stevens et al., 2013). Maltreated youth exhibit greater negative emotionality, particularly anger reactivity, than non-maltreated youth (Gunnar & Donzella, 2002), and often have difficulties modulating their responses to emotional situations (Kim-Spoon, Haskett, Longo, & Nice, 2012, Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). These regulatory difficulties, in turn, contribute to a host of problematic behaviors, including aggression, delinquency, and other externalizing tendencies (Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Jaffee, 2017; Mullin & Hinshaw, 2007).

Yet, not all maltreated youth manifest emotional dysregulation. Some demonstrate resilience, functioning competently in social and emotional domains, despite having endured trauma and adversity (Flores, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2005; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Cicchetti, 2010; Haskett, Nears, Sabourin Ward, & McPherson, 2006). Accordingly, it is of considerable interest to identify factors that influence emotion regulation in maltreated youth, leading some to exhibit minimal deficits and others to fall into a pattern of maladaptation. In the present investigation, we focused on one such unexplored factor: implicit beliefs about emotion. We assessed whether such beliefs differed between maltreated and comparison youth and whether they predicted youth's aggressive tendencies.

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1.1. Implicit beliefs about emotion and aggression

Broadly, implicit beliefs about emotion refer to individuals' perceptions of the controllability of their emotions, with such beliefs falling along a continuum (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014). At one end are individuals who endorse an *entity theory* of emotion, believing that their emotions are beyond their control; at the other are individuals who endorse an *incremental theory*, believing that their emotions can be changed through effort (e.g. Tamir et al., 2007; De Castella et al., 2013).

Whether individuals tend toward entity or incremental beliefs has significant implications for their emotion regulation tendencies and behavioral functioning. In young adults, for example, those who view emotions as impossible to modify (i.e., who hold an entity belief) tend to appraise negative affect as threatening (Kappes & Schikowski, 2013) and often fail to regulate their emotions or behaviors in anticipation of emotionally-arousing situations (Tamir et al., 2007). These individuals, moreover, are prone to managing their affect by avoiding rather than actively confronting unpleasant emotional stimuli, a tendency that is ultimately associated with greater psychological distress (Shallcross, Troy, Boland, & Mauss, 2010; Shahar & Herr, 2011). Conversely, young adults who view emotions as under their control (i.e., who hold an incremental belief) are more likely to attempt to alter their emotional responses both in anticipation of an emotional event and actively as the event unfolds. Such individuals, as well, are more effective and confident while doing so (De Castella et al., 2013; Deng, Sang, & Chen, 2015; Kappes & Schikowski, 2013; Schroder, Dawood, Yalch, Donnellan, & Moser, 2015; Kneeland, Dovidio, Joormann, & Clark, 2016; Tamir et al., 2007), and they generally utilize regulation strategies that are adaptive in many settings, such as cognitive reappraisal (i.e., reframing how one thinks about an emotional event to change its emotional impact) (Schroder et al., 2015). Finally, adults who hold incremental beliefs report fewer mental health symptoms, higher self-esteem, and better social adjustment than adults who hold entity beliefs (De Castella et al, 2013; Schroder et al., 2015).

Most work on implicit beliefs of emotion has focused on adults. The few studies to date examining youth, however, have yielded similar findings. Specifically, not only do youth's beliefs about emotion appear to fall along the same entity to incremental continuum (Romero et al., 2014), but holding entity beliefs about emotion is also associated with poorer mental health in youth, including greater depressive symptoms and less flexible and adaptive emotion regulation. Incremental beliefs, on the other hand, are associated with youth's greater emotional well-being and use of regulation strategies that are well-suited to the situation (Romero et al., 2014; Schleider & Weisz, 2016; Suveg & Zeman, 2004).

Although extant work with adults and youth has largely concerned the links between implicit beliefs about emotion and both general regulation tendencies and internalizing problems (e.g., depression), there are several reasons to suspect that implicit beliefs should also predict externalizing problems, such as aggression. First, entity theories in other domains (i.e., believing that personality, peer relations, or intelligence are outside one's control) are generally predictive of increased externalizing tendencies among a wide range of youth (see Schleider, Abel, & Weisz, 2015 for a review). For example, youth who view others' personalities or their peer relationships as unchangeable tend to evaluate others' wrong-doing more harshly and endorse more aggressive retaliation against others when provoked (Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Levy & Dweck, 1999). Indeed, interventions designed to shift youths' implicit beliefs about personality from entity towards incremental perceptions (i.e., from believing people's personality traits are fixed to believing that they are malleable) have shown success in reducing youths' subsequent reactive aggression, that is, impulsive and emotionally-charged aggressive responses to threat (Yeager, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2013).

Second, entity beliefs may foster hostile attribution biases (i.e., a tendency to readily perceive hostility in ambiguous situations) (Yeager, Miu, Powers, & Dweck, 2013), which in turn are predictive of aggression, especially reactive forms (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Studies of implicit beliefs about personality, for example, suggest that youth with entity theories are more likely to interpret even ambiguous provocation from peers as hostile and respond to this perceived provocation with aggression (Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck 2011; Yeager et al., 2013). When these youth are taught to adopt more incremental beliefs about others through interventions, they often show subsequent reductions in both hostile attributions and reactive aggression (Yeager et al., 2013). And third, as mentioned, entity beliefs specifically about emotion are related to less adaptive and efficient emotion regulation, and poor regulation is a significant risk factor for aggression (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010).

As a final note, the links between implicit beliefs and aggression may be most relevant when considering children's engagement in reactive, rather than proactive, aggression. Reactive aggression is impulsive and motivated by anger, retaliation, or defensiveness to perceived or actual provocation (Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010; Cima & Raine, 2009). Beliefs about the controllability of emotion may play a specific and important role in children's ability to inhibit these emotionally-driven responses. Children's proactive aggression, on the other hand, should be less if at all related to their beliefs about emotion, given that proactive aggression typically involves unemotional and deliberate actions to achieve a goal (Hubbard et al., 2010). These possibilities need to be tested directly.

1.2. Maltreatment,implicit beliefs, and aggression

Some evidence points to the possibility that maltreatment might uniquely predispose children to entity beliefs, and that these beliefs may have implications for children's aggressive behavior. Considerable research indicates, for example, that maltreated children are likely to grow up in environments in which poor emotion regulation skills are modeled by caregivers (Calkins & Fox, 2002). This may be especially true of physically abused youth, whose parents tend to experience and display high levels of anger, frustration, and hostility (McPherson, Lewis, Lynn, Haskett, & Behrend, 2009; Wilson, Rack, Shi, & Norris, 2008), and who are uniquely prone to aggressive outbursts (Shields & Cicchetti, 1998). Maltreating parents are also less likely to discuss emotions with