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Research article

Identity and relatedness as mediators between child emotional abuse and adult couple adjustment in women

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ABSTRACT

The empirical literature indicates that childhood emotional abuse (CEA) produces long lasting impairments in interpersonal relatedness and identity, often referred to as *self-capacities*. CEA has also been shown to negatively impact couple functioning. This study examined the role of identity and interpersonal conflicts in mediating the relationship between CEA and women's report of couple adjustment among 184 French Canadian women from the general population. Path analysis revealed that CEA was related to poorer couple adjustment through its impact on dysfunctional self-capacities and the experience of greater conflicts in relationships. Findings highlight the importance of assessing CEA to better explain couple adjustment in women with relationship difficulties and provide potential intervention targets based on the self-capacities framework.

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Introduction

Considerable literature demonstrates that childhood emotional abuse (CEA) is associated with difficulties in psychological and relational adjustment in adulthood (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2006; Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007; Riggs, Cusimano, & Benson, 2011; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). CEA involves a pattern of repeated behavior including criticism, threats, shaming, blame, humiliation, or insults directed toward the child (Briere, Godbout, & Runtz, 2012; Courtois & Ford, 2009; Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2002). CEA has often been included within an overall childhood maltreatment variable, without examining its unique sequelae (DiLillo, Lewis, & Loreto-Colgan, 2007; Whisman, 2006). However, CEA appears to be one of the most pervasive and destructive types of childhood maltreatment (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005; Briere, Madni, & Godbout, 2015; Kapeleris & Paivio, 2011; O'Dougherty Wright, 2007). Therefore specific attention to the long-term harmful effects of CEA is much needed.

Child Emotional Abuse and Couple Adjustment

Compared to non-maltreated individuals, survivors of child maltreatment report increased levels of difficulty in several areas of couple functioning, including intimacy, sexuality, and conflict resolution (DiLillo et al., 2007). However, only a few empirical studies have explored CEA as a unique type of maltreatment with the potential to impact dyadic adjustment (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). For example, Perry, DiLillo, and Peugh (2007) demonstrated the predictive role of CEA on marital

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satisfaction and emphasized the importance of assessing intermediate variables such as psychological distress, hostility, paranoia, and depression. Similarly, [Petretic-Jackson et al. \(1993\)](#) revealed that CEA survivors' impression of being less "lovable and likable" may contribute to negative self-perceptions that may decrease the quality of their interpersonal relationships. [Riggs et al. \(2011\)](#) also observed that CEA is associated with poor relationship adjustment through anxious and avoidant attachment in a sample of heterosexual college student couples. Similarly, [Paradis and Boucher \(2010\)](#) revealed that survivors of CEA report greater interpersonal difficulties in their couple relationships than non-victims. For example, survivors reported being more cold or distant with their partner, trying to please their partner too much, being too aggressive toward their partner or not being assertive enough. [Riggs and Kaminski \(2010\)](#) showed that CEA predicted dyadic adjustment above and beyond other child maltreatment variables such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. Similarly, using a sample of 202 newlywed couples, [DiLillo et al. \(2009\)](#) found that psychological abuse was related to decreases in marital satisfaction over time for both husbands and wives. More recently, [Maneta, Cohen, Schulz, and Waldinger \(2014\)](#) found that each partner's history of CEA was related to their own as well as to their partner's marital dissatisfaction.

Based on these findings, the experience of CEA appears to hamper a survivor's intrapersonal identity and their ability to develop intimacy with significant others later in life ([Davis, Petretic-Jackson, & Ting, 2001](#)), which is potentially detrimental to couple adjustment. This study tested the proposition that CEA would be associated with an impaired sense of self and identity and a proclivity to engage in emotionally upsetting or chaotic relationships, which in turn may contribute to less satisfying relationships with a romantic partner.

Childhood Emotional Abuse, Identity and Relatedness

The relational context in which a child is raised is particularly crucial. Consistent with early childhood development perspectives such as attachment theory ([Bowlby, 1969](#)), positive attachment with parental figures may have significant impacts on the growing child's development of the self as well as later functioning ([Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007](#); [Liang, Williams, & Siegel, 2006](#)). Abusive family environments, on the other hand, prevent the child from developing in a safe and stable environment with emotionally attuned caretakers. Evidence suggests that CEA leads to disturbance in the specific realms of interpersonal relationships and identity ([Briere & Rickards, 2007](#); [Briere & Runtz, 2002](#)), which are aspects of the self-capacities conceptual framework ([Briere, 2000](#); [Pearlman & Courtois, 2005](#)).

The concept of self-capacities, initially rooted in psychodynamic theory ([Kohut, 1977](#)), was later introduced to the trauma field by [McCann and Pearlman \(1990\)](#), and most recently modified by [Briere \(2000\)](#). The notion of altered "self-capacities" ([Briere, 2000](#)) may be understood as encompassing three specific types of disturbance: (1) difficulty in one's ability to access and maintain a stable sense of identity or self (identity disturbance), (2) a lack of ability to regulate and/or tolerate negative emotions (affect dysregulation), and (3) difficulty in forming and sustaining meaningful relationships with others (relational disturbance). Impairments in these areas, in turn, are known to contribute to important psychosocial problems (such as difficulty trusting others, concern over possible abandonment, struggles with intimacy, etc.) ([Allen, 2011](#); [Briere & Rickards, 2007](#); [Godbout, Runtz, MacIntosh, & Briere, 2013](#)).

An important aspect of functioning in individuals who experience CEA is related to the process of identity construction. Indeed, developmental difficulties typically observed in individuals with a history of trauma exposure often relate to the individual's sense of self. For example, survivors may have developed an "other-directed" orientation ([Briere, 1996, 2002](#)) wherein they focus on and accommodate themselves to the needs of others in such a way that may neglect their own needs, well-being, or safety. Survivors of CEA may also complain of feelings of emptiness, lack of self-understanding, contradictory thoughts and feelings, and inability to set goals for the future ([Hamilton, 1988](#); [Kohut, 1977](#); [McCann & Pearlman, 1990](#)). Finally, some survivors may lack the internal self-monitoring and self-awareness that would otherwise provide insight into their own feelings, thoughts, needs, goals, and behaviors ([Briere & Rickards, 2007](#); [Cloitre, Cohen, & Koenen, 2006](#)). These difficulties may harm romantic relationship quality and satisfaction, since a certain degree of insight and self-awareness is necessary for romantic partners to collaborate in setting mutual goals ([Feeney & Noller, 2004](#)) and to establish a satisfactory and fulfilling relationship ([Kessler, 2000](#)).

CEA appears to impact the survivor's capacity to develop and maintain intimate relationships ([Godbout et al., 2013](#); [Pearlman & Courtois, 2005](#)). Because CEA experiences occur early in the lifespan, when representations and expectations of interpersonal relationships are first formed, adult survivors may be particularly sensitive to rejection, and may experience problems trusting others, unstable or chaotic relationships, or ambivalence regarding intimacy ([Briere & Jordan, 2009](#); [Dietrich, 2007](#); [Riggs, 2010](#)). They may be more likely to struggle with managing interpersonal difficulties and thus might develop negative views of others, themselves, and their value in relationships ([Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009](#); [Pearlman, 2003](#)). Empirical data indicate that survivors are more likely than non-survivors to report interpersonal conflicts ([Briere & Rickards, 2007](#)), difficulties in forming and maintaining close relationships ([Davis et al., 2001](#); [Pearlman & Courtois, 2005](#)), and involvement in distressing relationships ([Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007](#)).

Childhood Emotional Abuse and Couple Adjustment in the Context of Self-Capacities

Despite a growing literature in the field of trauma, few studies have focused on the role of intermediate variables in explaining how childhood trauma might affect later couple adjustment. Previous studies have emphasized the mediating

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