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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Child maltreatment and risk behaviors: The roles of callous/unemotional traits and conscientiousness

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 March 2015
Received in revised form 26 June 2015
Accepted 1 July 2015
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Child abuse
Callous/unemotional traits
Risk behaviors
Substance abuse
Sexual risk taking
Violence
Emerging adulthood

ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment poses significant risk to the development of callous/unemotional traits as well as risk behaviors such as engaging in violence, having sex with strangers, and binge drinking. In the current study, the indirect pathway from child maltreatment to risk behaviors was examined via callous/unemotional traits; whereas the conscientious personality trait was tested as a moderator of this indirect pathway. Young adults and parents ($N = 361$; $M_{age} = 19.14$, $SD = 1.44$) completed questionnaires on child maltreatment histories, callousness/unemotional traits, personality characteristics, and risk behaviors. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the hypothesized direct, indirect and conditional indirect effects. Findings showed indirect links between the child maltreatment latent factor and physical fighting, having sex with strangers, and binge drinking via callous/unemotional traits. Furthermore, the conscientiousness personality type significantly buffered the connection between callous/unemotional traits and physical fighting, supporting a conditional indirect effects. Callous/unemotional traits are important factors in the underlying mechanism between child maltreatment and risk behaviors among young adults, and conscientiousness serves as a protective factor against violence. Preventive intervention programs and clinicians may benefit from focusing in addressing callous/unemotional traits among youth who report childhood maltreatment experiences as well as targeting conscientiousness as a protective factor.

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Introduction

Participation in risk behaviors peaks in emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 1992; Pharo, Sim, Graham, Gross, & Hayne, 2011), making it an important developmental phase to study. Exposure to adverse rearing environments, such as those involving the maltreatment of children, potentiates significant risk for the development of risk behaviors during young adulthood such as violence (Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001), sexual risk-taking (Arriola, Loudon, Doldren, & Fortenberry, 2005; Bornovalova, Gwadz, Kahler, Aklin, & Lejuez, 2008), and substance use (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008; Jasinski, Williams, & Siegel, 2000; Oshri, Rogosch, Burnette, & Cicchetti, 2011). However, why young adults with maltreatment histories are at increased risk for the development of risk behaviors is less clear. Growing research suggests that underlying emotional dysregulation and interacting personality traits might be involved in this path (Oshri, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2013). Thus, the present study utilizes a sample of young adults to examine the indirect paths

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from child maltreatment to various risk behaviors via individual differences in callous/unemotional traits. Subsequently, the utility of conscientious personality characteristics in buffering this indirect path is tested.

Child Maltreatment and Risk Behaviors

Research has empirically documented associations between adverse parenting and a wide range of risk behaviors in adolescence and young adulthood (Gilbert et al., 2009). More specifically, child maltreatment has been found to lead to increased alcohol use (Moran, Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004; Shin, Hong, & Wills, 2012; Shin, 2012), increased risky sexual behavior (Mason, Zimmerman, & Evans, 1998; Oshri, Tubman, & Burnette, 2012; Schraufnagel, Davis, George, & Norris, 2010), and aggressive, violent acts (Fang & Corso, 2007; Lee & Hoaken, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; White & Widom, 2003; Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004). Less is known about the process through which self-reported childhood adversity is related to risk behaviors in young adulthood. Growing developmental research on substance use in adolescents and young adults suggests that different problem behaviors with underlying emotion dysregulation bases (e.g., externalizing problems, impulsivity) mediate the link between childhood adversity and risk behaviors (e.g., Oshri et al., 2013; Tarter, Kirisci, Reynolds, & Mezzich, 2004). It may be the case that emotional coping strategies used by abused youth result in increased vulnerability for risky behavior in young adulthood. One of these candidate adaptations is callous/unemotional traits, which represent a specific emotion organization that is linked to poor behavioral inhibition. However, callous/unemotional traits have been infrequently tested in relation to child maltreatment and multiple distinct risk behaviors in young adulthood.

Child Maltreatment, Emotion Regulation, and Callous/Unemotional Traits

Experiences of child maltreatment have been connected to the development of callous/unemotional traits (Kimonis, Fanti, Isoma, & Donoghue, 2013), which are strong predictors of antisocial behaviors (Frick & White, 2008; Lynam, Miller, Vachon, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2009). Emotion regulation is an important developmental task that is consolidated during childhood in part through continuous and consistent positive socialization experiences with the main caretaker (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Gross, 1998). Children who experience maltreatment by parental figures may be at risk for the development of psychopathology (i.e., incapacitated emotion regulation) via undermined emotion regulation capacities (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009; Kim-Spoon, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2013). For example, high levels of callous/unemotional traits have been conceptualized as manifestations of emotional dysregulation. Specifically, callous/unemotional traits are characterized by the disrupted emotional processing of one's own fear and another's expression of distress (Blair, 2013; Frick & White, 2008).

Youth with elevated callous/unemotional traits are characterized as having a lack of feelings of guilt and empathy (Frick & White, 2008). The connection between child maltreatment and callous/unemotional traits has been recently theorized to reflect an adaptive emotional organization (Belsky & Pluess, 2013; Del Giudice, Ellis, & Shirtcliff, 2011). Specifically, the Adaptive Calibration Model suggests that the organization of extreme patterns of emotional responsivity, such as callous/unemotional traits, arise as strategic coping responses aimed for adaption to stressful settings (Del Giudice et al., 2011). Youth who are exposed to adverse rearing environments cope via dampened stress responsivity, thereby shielding them emotionally from harsh relational patterns while subsequently increasing their vulnerability to participation in risky behaviors. Despite an emerging body of research that indicates that child maltreatment is significantly associated with the development of callous/unemotional traits, most of the empirical work has largely focused on clinical and incarcerated youth samples, limiting the generalizability of the findings (Kimonis, Fanti, et al., 2013; Kimonis, Cross, Howard, & Donoghue, 2013; Kimonis, Frick, Munoz, & Aucoin, 2008). Thus, an empirical examination of the indirect role that callous/unemotional traits may have in the development of risk behaviors in a non-clinical/incarcerated young adult sample is needed.

Callous/Unemotional Traits, Dysregulation, and Risk Behaviors

Callous/unemotional traits are defined as a general absence of guilt and empathy and are empirically attendant to dysregulated emotional arousal. Youth with elevated callous/unemotional traits exhibit reduced emotional arousal when exposed to other people's distress cues (Blair, 1999; Pardini, Lochman, & Frick, 2003) and a flat fear reaction to distressing or potentially risky scenarios (Frick, Liliensfeld, Ellis, Loney, & Silverthorn, 1999; Pardini et al., 2003). Consequently, increased callous/unemotional traits entail emotional unresponsiveness to negative reinforcement introduced by the environment (Hawes & Dadds, 2007; O'Brien and Frick, 1996). Frick and White (2008) have purported that underlying callous/unemotional traits are a dysregulated emotional processing of negative consequences as well as underdeveloped empathic responses. Specifically, youth with elevated callous/unemotional traits lack the ability to appropriately respond to perceived consequences associated with risk behaviors, hurting their decision-making abilities. Indeed, recent neurological studies add support to this hypothesis by showing associations between callous/unemotional traits and reduced amygdala responsiveness (see Blair, 2013 for a review), which is an essential brain structure in decision-making that links emotional responses to experiences.

Callous/unemotional traits (i.e., insensitivity to fear and empathy) may represent a fitting adaptation to adversity (Belsky & Pluess, 2013; Del Giudice et al., 2011). However, adaptation to adversity is not without cost and has the potential to increase vulnerability for engagement in unique risk behaviors. Extant research has found strong associations between

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