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Gender-specific association between childhood trauma and rheumatoid arthritis: A case–control study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) has been associated with a variety of emotional stressors, but findings remain inconclusive if RA is related to childhood trauma, which is known to have long-lasting negative consequences for physical health decades into adulthood. We investigated the association between childhood trauma and RA by comparing histories of child abuse and neglect between RA patients and adults from the general population in a cross-sectional case–control study.
Methods: 331 patients with definite RA and 662 gender- and age-matched adults from the general population were administered the self-report Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) for the assessment of emotional, physical and sexual abuse as well as emotional and physical neglect.
Results: Adjusting for gender and current depression, RA patients scored significantly higher in all CTQ subscales apart from sexual abuse and physical neglect than the controls. Adjusted odds ratios for these types of childhood trauma were higher in the RA group than in controls ranging from 2.0 for emotional neglect (95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.4–3.0) to 2.6 for emotional abuse (95% CI: 1.4–4.7). Gender-specific analyses revealed basically the same pattern for women, but not for men.
Conclusion: Our findings suggest an association between childhood trauma and development of RA, particularly in women. This relationship may be mediated by dysregulations of neuro-endocrine-immune networks, but larger prospective studies are needed to clarify the association between early life stress and the risk for RA in genetically susceptible individuals.

Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) represents a chronic, systemic, inflammatory, autoimmune disorder affecting the synovial membrane of multiple joints in a symmetrical fashion. It may cause joint damage, disability, decreased quality of life, and cardiovascular and other comorbidities. In developed countries, RA affects 0.5 to 1.0% of adults, and is most typical in women and elderly people [1]. Although its precise etiology is not yet known, there is mounting evidence that the complex interactions of genetic susceptibility, immunological and inflammatory processes as well as environmental factors contribute to the risk for and course of RA [1]. Among the environmental factors, psychosocial stress is of major importance, and the impact of stressful events on the course of the disease, e.g. clinical exacerbations and disease activity, is undisputed [2–8]. In contrast, the role of stress as a trigger or risk factor in the development of RA remains controversial [3, 6–8]. For example, in line with prior research [9] a recent longitudinal study based on the follow-up of nationwide and population-based cohorts did not find that the death of a child as a severe stressor increased the risk for RA in bereaved parents [10]. However, several other investigations have indicated an association between stress and the development of RA [8, 11, 12].

Childhood trauma represents one of the most extreme forms of stress, and is known to have long-lasting negative consequences for both mental and physical health decades into adulthood [13–17]. Adverse childhood experiences are related to a number of chronic somatic conditions involving inflammatory processes, particularly cardiovascular and autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis or RA [15, 18, 19]. Additionally, traumatic stress in general and childhood trauma in particular are independently associated with a pro-inflammatory state in later life [20,21], which may contribute to the complex pathogenesis of autoimmune diseases [5]. Correspondingly, a cross-sectional general population study reported that adults with two or more childhood

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adversities had a 100% increased risk of rheumatic diseases including RA [18]. In an independent investigation, childhood physical abuse was associated with a 50% increased risk of arthritic disorders such as RA [15]. A large prospective cohort study also found a moderate increase in the risk of self-reported arthritis among subjects with traumatic experiences in childhood [22]. In clinical samples of adult RA patients, prevalence of retrospectively recorded childhood abuse including sexual molestation, penetration and physical assault ranged between 13 and 50% [23,24], which exceeds figures from the general population [17,19,25,26]. However, a community based, case–control study did not find an association between traumatic childhood experiences and the risk of RA [9]. These inconsistent findings can be attributed to methodological limitations, e.g. vague disease definitions such as self-reported arthritis [15,22], number of cases with RA below 100 [9,18,23,24] or disregard of the socioeconomic status (SES), which is relevant both in RA and childhood trauma [14,27,28]. More importantly, none of the above mentioned studies controlled for depression although adult retrospective reports of childhood trauma may be biased by depressive mood, which is frequent in RA patients and may lead to mood-congruent memory distortions [29–31]. Finally, while RA is more frequent in women, and girls and boys are differentially exposed to various types of childhood adversities [1,32], gender differences in the assumed relationship between childhood trauma and RA have not yet been investigated.

Taking these findings and considerations into account, the objective of our study was twofold: (i) to investigate the association between childhood trauma and RA by comparing histories of child abuse and neglect between RA patients and individuals from the general population in a case–control design, controlling for sociodemographic factors and current depression, and (ii) to analyze whether the hypothesized association differs between women and men.

Methods

Procedure and participants

The RA sample was recruited at the Department of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Schön Klinik, Hamburg Eilbek (Germany). Because we intended to obtain a broad sample of adult RA patients, we only chose three inclusion criteria: (i) definite RA according to the 1987 revised criteria for the classification of rheumatoid arthritis by the American Rheumatism Association [33], (ii) age at 1st RA diagnosis older than 16 years, and (iii) ability to engage in self-report measures, i.e. lack of cognitive impairment and/or fluent in German language. 570 patients attending the clinic in 2009 and 2010 met these criteria. All of them were approached by letter including an invitation to participate, a consent form and the self-report measures for the assessment of childhood trauma and current depression (see below for details). 66 of these eligible subjects refused participation, and 159 patients did not respond to repeated efforts of contact. Of the 345 participants returning the questionnaires, 14 (4.1%) had to be excluded due to incomplete data on childhood adversities. Thus, 331 adult RA patients were considered for the present study.

The control subjects from the general population participated in the "**L**ife-**E**vents and **G**ene-**En**vironment Interaction in **D**epression" (LEGEND) study [25,26,34] representing a cross-sectional investigation nested in a community-based cohort study, the Study of Health in Pomerania (SHIP) in North East Germany [35]. For the purpose of the present study that was approved by the local Institutional Review Board and conforms to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki we only included individuals without cognitive impairment (assessed by clinical psychologists). Control subjects were randomly selected in a 2:1 ratio, matched for age, gender, marital status and educational level to the case subjects. All participants gave written informed consent.

Measures

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) was used for the self-report of child maltreatment [36]. It is a brief, reliable and valid screening device for histories of childhood trauma including *emotional*, *sexual* and *physical abuse* as well as *emotional* and *physical neglect*. Each of these dimensions is captured by five items each which are endorsed on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a higher degree of childhood maltreatment. In addition to a dimensional scoring procedure, the manual provides threshold scores to determine the severity of abuse and neglect (none = 0, low = 1, moderate = 2 and severe to extreme = 3). Dichotomized variables (0 and 1 as absent versus 2 and 3 as present) were created for each trauma type. In independent studies the CTQ was reported to show good reliability and validity. Additionally, the five-factor model (i.e. the 5 subscales reflecting the different types of childhood trauma) was empirically confirmed [36,37]. The psychometric properties of the German version of the CTQ were found to be similar to the original [38]. Current depression (i.e. in the last two weeks) was measured by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II), which is a 21-item self-report questionnaire with high reliability and validity [39].

Statistical analysis

The data analyses were computed using the 'Statistical Package for the Social Sciences' (SPSS, version 18.0). RA patients and participants of the control group were compared by analyses of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables and χ^2 test for categorical variables. Because there were differences in gender distribution and current depression, these variables were taken into account as potential confounders in subsequent analyses. We also calculated effect sizes (Cohen's d) when possible. To determine the relationship between childhood trauma and RA, we performed logistic regression analyses with the different types of childhood trauma as dependent variable and health status (RA vs. control group) as independent variables. These analyses were re-run for women and men separately. We report odds ratios (OR) with the corresponding 95% confidence interval (95% CI). Significance level was set at $p<.05$.

Results

The sociodemographic and clinical data of the RA patients and the control group from the general population are presented in Table 1. As intended there were no differences between the samples with respect to gender distribution, age, marital status, and educational level. Patients with RA reported more current depression as measured with the BDI-II than the control group. Among RA patients, the mean age at 1st diagnosis of RA was 49.8 years (SD = 14.4).

As depicted in Table 2, most dimensional CTQ scores were significantly higher in the RA sample compared to the general population, even when gender and depression were accounted for (apart from the subscales *sexual abuse* and *physical neglect*). Effect

Table 1
Sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of the two samples: patients with RA and controls from the general population

	RA patients (n = 331)	Control group (n = 662)	χ^2/F	p ≤
Women, %	81.6	81.6	0.0	1.0
Age, mean years (SD; range)	61.0 (13.6; 20–90)	61.0 (12.9; 29–89)	0.04	.947
Marital status, %			1.38	.502
Never married	10.6	8.5		
Married	61.8	64.5		
Separated, divorced, widowed	27.6	27.0		
Educational level, %			1.01	.604
<10 years	46.2	45.3		
10–11 years	34.1	37.0		
>11 years	19.6	17.7		
BDI-II, mean (SD)	14.3 (9.0)	6.7 (6.8)	219.66	.001