

Relationship between Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity in Indian Adults

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore relationship between Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity in Indian adults. The sample comprised of 108 participants aged between 20-39 years (54 aged 20-29 years and 54 aged 30-39 years). Findings demonstrated that the two variables in question are significantly correlated with each other and the experiences of these are not significantly different across different age groups. This research can have an implication for educating and counselling parents of young children, training school authorities, and assisting mental health practitioners in their work on developing preventive and intervention plans to assist and support their clients.

Keywords: *Relationship, Childhood Neglect and Rejection, Sensitivity*

The scientific study of human behaviour is multidimensional and has been extensively explored since decades as the field of psychology. Human beings are complex creatures. They continue to evolve internally and adapt to their external environments throughout their lives and as a result are an ever-changing product of a myriad of aspects and circumstances, both biological and environmental.

Childhood Neglect

Over decades, research has indicated that one of the most crucial and immensely formative periods of learning, adapting, and development is during childhood (Mate, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture*, 2022). Across literature on aspects related to childhood behaviour (Crouch, J.L., & Milner, J.S., 1993), attachment science (Wisdom, C.S. et al, 2018), personality (Jia, X., Wang, Q., & Lin, L. 2020), adult behaviour and patterns (Herrenkohl, T. I. et al, 2013), interpersonal relationships, professional life (Currie, J., & Spatz Widom, C., 2010), self-concept, habits and behaviours (Bland, V.J. et al., 2018), unconscious beliefs, self-regulation abilities, parenting styles and mental illnesses that may arise (Taillieu et al., 2016) (Spinhoven, P. et al., 2010), the impact of childhood experiences later on in life as adults has been intensively explored and in simplest of terms, it stands irrevocably established that childhood experiences have a huge impact on adult life across all areas (Mate, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture*, 2022). When these experiences have been negative and a child is subject to neglect, various

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problems are likely to show up in adult life. Maltreatment in early years has been seen as a major single risk factor for difficulties in social relations and overall prevalence of mental health issues in adulthood (Müller, L. E., et al, 2018).

Over years the predominant focus of the research related to negative childhood experiences has been on sexual or physical abuse (Strauss, Kinnard, & Williams, The Neglect Scale, 1997) and the concept of neglect, though being studied more, is still not fully understood and appreciated.

Various definitions of neglect exist within the field of psychology and other related areas. One of these definitions, states that neglectful behaviour by a caregiver is one wherein the caregiver fails to act in ways that are considered culturally and societally necessary to ensure the developmental needs of the child are met, and which form part of the responsibilities of the caregiver (Strauss et al., 1995; Strauss and Kantor, 2005). This definition touches upon important aspects such as universally understood responsibilities of caregivers as well as cultural connotations in the realm of raising and caregiving for children. Drawing from this definition and other literature it can be said that childhood neglect focusses on what did not happen in one's childhood that should have happened and how this holds equal if not higher power over who we become as adults, as compared to things that happened and which we remember (Webb, 2014).

Common forms of childhood neglect include physical neglect, emotional neglect, cognitive neglect, educational neglect, and supervisory neglect.

Physical neglect refers to lack of providing the child with basic physical necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, medical attention and care (Bagley, Wood, & Young, 2005). Cognitive and educational neglect entails various aspects including not paying for academics and education, not providing a supportive academic environment at home, allowing the child to skip school often, not reading to the child, not helping with home assignments, and not making efforts to support a learning-disabled child (Leiter & Jonnson, 1994) (Strauss, Kinnard, & Williams, The Neglect Scale, 1997). Supervisory neglect can broadly be understood to mean not attending to the child, failing to set healthy limits, not being able to safeguard the child from problematic situations or people, not knowing the whereabouts of the child and other similar behaviour (Coohey, 2003). Emotional neglect is one of the most pervasive forms of childhood neglect and relates to lack of affection, support, love companionship, guidance attunement, and more. Research over decades evidences that neglect, especially of the emotional needs of a child such as love and support, may amount to maltreatment having the highest risk of serious social and psychological issues to children (Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, 1982) (Robins, 1966; Spitz 1959).

Indian Context

India, especially in the less urbanised areas, has been plagued by various adversities for children including but not limited to abuse and neglect, substance use in early years, socio-economic and caste divides, poverty and more, which are linked to a plethora of physical and mental health struggles in later years (Hughes, et al., 2017). The reason for these adversities can be traced to a predominantly patriarchal culture which normalizes punishing, spanking, and reprimanding children (Nijhara, Bhatia, & Unnikrishnan, 2018). It is not hard to imagine that while struggling with such adversities, parents are unable to provide the nurturance that children need. However, on a related topic it has been found that children belonging to higher income households are four times more at risk of physical abuse as

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compared to their lower income household counterparts. This may come as shocking but the reason observed for this in studies has been that of higher expectations of academic achievement from parent along with a child's general status and identity being undermined in comparison to elder perspectives (Bandewar, Pitre, & Lingam, 2018).

Rejection Sensitivity

As children and adults, a core need for humans as collective beings is that of being accepted by others around them. However, this need is not always fulfilled and often individuals develop various traits and dispositions in response to their past and ongoing experiences related to such lack of belonging and acceptance. Once such disposition is that of rejection sensitivity which assesses how much does an individual anticipate rejection from others and how intensely do they respond to being rejected (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

Each person expects, anticipates, and accepts rejection in different ways and intensities, and this is the foundation of what rejection sensitivity means. It is a cognitive and affective disposition in which an individual tends to expect rejection anxiously, perceive it readily, and react to it intensely (Downey & Feldman, 1996). It has been found that how adults remember being accepted – rejected by both parents during childhood, impacts their levels of rejection sensitivity as adults (Ibrahim, D.M., et al, 2015). The behavioural patterns of such individuals, automatically become those of ensuring, however possible, to avoid rejection and receive acceptance (Feldman & Downey, 1994). In continuation to this theme, research also finds that children who have experienced rejection often grow up to be adults who are fearful of intimacy due to being sensitive to the possibility of being rejected and find it hard to emotionally trust others (Rohner et al, 2019).

It has also been seen that individuals sensitive to rejection behave in a cold and unfriendly manner in response to negative and subdued affects from others. This avoidance and/or coldness, though aimed to reduce rejection is often what actually leads to the rejection that such individuals fear (Meehan, Cain, Roche, Clarkin, & Panfilis, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to study the association between childhood neglect and rejection sensitivity. A sample of 108 participants participated in the study. The locale of the study was urban areas of metro cities of India. Some participants were contacted personally and random as well as snowball sampling method was used to induct the remaining participants. Self-report measures namely Multidimensional Neglectful Behaviour Scale – Form A: Adolescent & Adult Recall Version (MNBS – Form A) (Strauss et al., 1995) and Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire – Adult Version (ARSQ) (Berenson et al, 2009) were used to measure the levels of the variables under study. The data collected was statistically analysed to assess the correlations between the variables and to also assess the difference in means between the 2 groups of respondents, i.e., individuals between 20-29 years and those between 30-39 years of age.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Correlation Analysis

A correlational analysis was undertaken to examine the relationship between the two variables.

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Relationship between Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity

Table 1: Correlational Analysis between Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity

		Childhood Neglect	Rejection Sensitivity
Childhood Neglect	Pearson Correlation	1	-.394**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	108	108
Rejection Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	-.394**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	108	108

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As evidenced from Table 1, there existed a negative correlation between Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity, with correlation coefficient of **-.394, indicating a significant negative correlation**. It is significant at $p < 0.01$, which signifies that it is unlikely that the observed correlation could have occurred by chance.

It is important to note that as per the scoring and interpretation guidelines followed, **a low score on childhood neglect indicates a higher experience of neglect, while a high score indicates a lower experience of neglect**. Therefore, the negative correlation as revealed between childhood neglect and rejection sensitivity would be reversed and would mean that **as the experience of childhood neglect increases, the level of rejection sensitivity in adulthood tends to increase as well**.

This finding fits well with intuitive logic that if a child perceived their parent to be neglectful and non-accepting, then there is likely to be a fear of rejection as well and anticipation of being rejected by significant others, like the perceived rejection by parents. The finding was also in line with and supported similar previous research (Ibrahim et al. 2015) which stated that childhood experiences of rejection by parents leads to building up of rejection sensitivity that may extend to adulthood as well.

Table 2: Correlational Analysis between Sub-Types of Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity

		Rejection Sensitivity	Supervision Neglect	Cognitive Neglect	Physical Neglect	Emotional Neglect
Rejection Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	1	-.177	-.353**	-.239*	-.408**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.068	.000	.013	.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Supervision Neglect	Pearson Correlation	-.177	1	.415**	.558**	.351**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.068		.000	.000	.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Cognitive Neglect	Pearson Correlation	-.353**	.415**	1	.349**	.722**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Physical Neglect	Pearson Correlation	-.239*	.558**	.349**	1	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000	.000		.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Emotional Neglect	Pearson Correlation	-.408**	.351**	.722**	.402**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	108	108	108	108	108

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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As evidenced from Table 2, a negative correlation existed between all sub-types of Childhood Neglect and Rejection Sensitivity. Here too it needs to be borne in mind that a high score on **neglect indicates a low experience of neglect, and vice versa**.

Accordingly, the correlation coefficients between each sub-type of neglect and rejection sensitivity suggested that **as the level of neglect increases** (i.e., the score on neglect decreases), **the level of rejection sensitivity also increases**.

Amongst all sub-types of childhood neglect, it was evidenced that emotional neglect has the strongest association with rejection sensitivity with correlation coefficient of $-.408$. This was followed by cognitive neglect, physical neglect, and supervisory neglect respectively. This indicated that **emotional neglect in childhood has the strongest negative association with rejection sensitivity of Indian Adults**. This finding also supported previous research (Webb, 2022) focussed on the multitude of implications of childhood emotional neglect.

The above results supported general research conducted on childhood neglect and rejection sensitivity separately as well as some research that examined the association of these variables (Downey et al 1994; Rohner 2019; Haslam & Taylor 2022).

Despite abundant research on these variables over years, there appeared to be a gap in the associations between variables at a bifurcated level, by sub-types of neglect. Further, there existed a paucity of literature on the relationship of these variables when studied in the context of Indian adults. The above findings bridge these gaps to some extent and substantiate the existing research in this area.

COMPARISON OF MEANS – INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST

Independent sample t-tests were conducted to assess whether there are any age-related differences in the experience of childhood neglect, or adult experience of rejection sensitivity. The age brackets were taken as 20-29 years and 30-39 years.

Table 6 and 7 indicate the independent sample t- test for the variables in question. There were no significant differences between the mean scores of the age groups for either of the variables.

Table 6: Independent sample t-test for Childhood Neglect in individuals aged 20-29 and 30-39

	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
Childhood Neglect	20-29	54	65.28	9.5	-.532	0.596	-.89
	30-39	54	66.17	7.7			

As seen in Table 6 above, the t-value was calculated as $-.532$. Further the p value was 0.596 . A large **p value > 0.05** indicated that there was **no significant difference between the means of the 2 age groups considered**. Further a large p value also signified that any observed differences between the two age groups were likely **due to chance**. This was supported by the "Mean Difference" value of $-.88889$, which suggested that the **mean of the first group was slightly lower than the mean of the second group, but this difference was not statistically significant**.

Table 7: Independent sample t-test for Rejection Sensitivity in individuals aged 20-29 and 30-39

	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
Rejection Sensitivity	20-29	54	9.67	4.15	.671	.504	.5
	30-39	54	9.17	3.58			

As seen in Table 7 above, the t-value was calculated as .671. Further the p value was 0.504. A large **p value > 0.05** indicated that there was **no significant difference between the means of the 2 age groups considered.**

Further a large p value also signified that any observed differences between the two age groups were likely **due to chance**. This was supported by the "Mean Difference" value of 0.5, which suggested that the **mean of the first group was slightly higher than the mean of the second group, but this difference was not statistically significant.**

In summary it can be stated that the null hypothesis of no difference in mean scores was accepted for both variables under study when considering the grouping variables to be age related in age groups of 20-29 years and 30-39 years.

The overall analysis and results discussed above explored the often-studied variables of childhood neglect and rejection sensitivity in a fresh light and were helpful in both, confirming prior research, as well as arriving at new and previously unexplored aspects and associations amongst the variables. This study has bridged the gap by exploring associations between the variables including the sub-types of childhood neglect and by focussing on Indian population as was not previously done.

Practical Implications

Investigating the associations between childhood neglect and adulthood sensitivity to rejection can have important implications for understanding the dynamics of parent-child relationships and can serve as a useful tool in designing awareness and educational programmes for parents of young children in order to prevent the negative impact of such a childhood.

Past literature has explored the possibilities of the effect of childhood neglect on a myriad of difficulties that one may develop in adulthood (Cameron et al, 2017) (Muller et al., 2018). Further, research indicates that childhood neglect can result in higher levels of rejection sensitivity. In turn this higher level of rejection sensitivity can have a cascading negative impact on overall mental health and wellness and relationship quality (Gao et al, 2017) (Norona & Welsh, 2016) (Romero-Canyas et al, 2011) (Staebler et al, 2011).

Considering the above trickle-down effect of the impact and implications of a negative childhood experience, it becomes crucial to use the results of this study as well as previously studied constructs to create preventive and remedial measures in domestic settings and school environments, as well as to support mental health practitioners in their work with vulnerable populations.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. Firstly, our research sample was not too large, and generally research on such sensitive aspects with huge implications would benefit from a

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bigger sample for better results. Secondly, the study depended on self-reported measures of assessment which may not be answered honestly all the time, especially keeping in mind that the variables under study are highly personal in nature. Thirdly, our study did not control for any other extraneous variables that could affect the experience of rejection sensitivity during adulthood.

Despite these limitations, our study results did give us a fair idea about the associations we intended to study, and they can be explored further in future studies.

Future Recommendations

- Future research can explore the development of these traits in a longitudinal study, to assess the impact of childhood neglect rather than just assessing the associations. A larger sample could be worked with for better results.
- Additionally, more research is recommended in identifying the relationship between these variables in different socio-demographic groups. The environmental factors that play a role in the development and impact of these traits can also be researched upon.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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