

Examining the Interplay of Childhood Emotional Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between childhood emotional abuse (CEA) and intimate partner violence (IPV) in young adults, with a focus on gender discrepancies in perpetration and victimization. A total of 120 participants, equally split by gender of male or female, supplied information on CEA, conflict strategies, and IPV encounters. Findings upon analysis using statistical tests, revealed notable positive associations between CEA and conflict strategies, victimization, and perpetration of IPV. Nevertheless, gender distinctions in IPV perpetration and victimization did not reach statistical significance. These results underscore the enduring influence of childhood mistreatment on involvement in IPV and underscore the necessity for gender-specific interventions. Through the adoption of a comprehensive, trauma-informed approach, professionals can provide better assistance to survivors and encourage healthy relationship dynamics. This investigation adds to the comprehension of the intricate interplay among childhood mistreatment, gender, and involvement in IPV, advocating for further examination and tailored interventions for impacted communities.

Keywords: *Childhood Emotional Abuse, Intimate Partner Violence, Young Adults, Gender Differences, Perpetration, Victimization*

In recent years, a growing acknowledgment has emerged regarding the substantial influence that childhood emotional abuse can exert on individuals, particularly throughout their adult years (Abramsky et al., 2011). Nevertheless, despite this increasing recognition, there remains a deficiency in societal and scholarly focus on emotional abuse and neglect when compared to other types of maltreatment like physical and sexual abuse. Exploring the correlation between childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence is pivotal in comprehending the enduring repercussions of emotional abuse and formulating efficacious interventions for young adults who have encountered such trauma.

In this research, our focus will center on two primary variables: childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence among young adults. Childhood emotional abuse pertains to the persistent mistreatment of a minor, encompassing acts of humiliation, disapproval, and intimidation that erode their self-worth (Anda et al., 2005). For instance, recollections from

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my childhood include instances where my parents consistently diminished and criticized me. Upon making an error, they would resort to hurtful epithets and phrases like "You're worthless" or "You can never get anything right." This type of emotional abuse left a lasting imprint on my self-assurance and self-belief. The repercussions of childhood emotional abuse can have profound and enduring effects on an individual's psychological well-being. Studies have elucidated that individuals who have undergone emotional abuse during their developmental years are at an elevated risk of developing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and diminished self-esteem (Taillieu et al., 2016). Furthermore, the ramifications of emotional abuse extend into adulthood and can materialize in various forms, encompassing challenges in establishing and sustaining healthy relationships, difficulties in regulating emotions, and a propensity towards engaging in self-destructive behaviors.

Intimate partner violence, pertains to any form of behavior occurring within the confines of an intimate relationship that inflicts physical, psychological, or sexual harm upon those involved in the relationship (Sugg, 2015). This includes instances of physical violence like hitting, slapping, or kicking, alongside psychological abuse such as the utilization of threats, manipulation, and controlling conduct. Furthermore, forms of IPV encompass sexual violence, coercion, and exploitation. To illustrate, a partner might engage in psychological abuse by consistently criticizing their significant other, undermining their sense of self-worth, and exerting control over their every action. In addition, immediate physical harm and enduring trauma can be inflicted through acts of physical violence like hitting or kicking.

The correlation between childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence among young adults represents a crucial focal point for scholarly investigation. Individuals who have undergone emotional abuse during their formative years may exhibit increased susceptibility to entering into abusive relationships as adults, assuming roles as either the perpetrator or the recipient of such maltreatment (Spertus et al., 2003).

Previous studies have indicated that incidents of maltreatment during one's childhood, particularly emotional abuse, have a direct correlation with an increased probability of both perpetrating and falling victim to instances of intimate partner violence in later stages of life. An example of this can be seen in Kub's research, which shed light on the prevalence of emotional abuse across various age groups like adolescents, college students, and adults. This underscores the significance of addressing this form of abuse in both academic investigations and intervention strategies (Mair et al., 2012). Furthermore, it has been discerned that disparities related to gender are evident in the levels of reported victimization due to intimate partner violence, with females exhibiting higher rates of victimization in comparison to males.

A prominent theory that has undergone extensive examination concerning childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence is the attachment theory. As per this theoretical framework, children who undergo emotional abuse may develop attachment styles that are insecure, manifesting as either anxious or avoidant attachment patterns. These attachment styles, in turn, have the potential to exert an influence on their adult romantic relationships, rendering them more prone to engagement in abusive partnerships. Existing research has provided evidence that individuals characterized by insecure attachment styles are predisposed to encountering challenges in establishing and sustaining healthy intimate

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relationships, consequently heightening their susceptibility to experiencing intimate partner violence (White & Widom, 2003).

Another significant theory that plays a pivotal role in elucidating the connection between childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence is the renowned social learning theory. This particular theoretical framework asserts that individuals acquire behaviors and attitudes by observing and imitating role models, especially within the familial context. Children who have been subjected to emotional abuse during their formative years might internalize these behavioral patterns and perceive them as standard or acceptable (Sellers et al., 2005). Consequently, they may exhibit a higher propensity to emulate or endure similar abusive conduct within their own intimate relationships upon reaching adulthood.

The theory of the cycle of violence postulates that individuals with a history of childhood emotional abuse are more susceptible to engaging in abusive partnerships later in life due to the perpetuation of this cycle of violence, as highlighted by Gómez (2010). This theoretical perspective suggests that individuals who have endured abuse during childhood may subconsciously seek to replicate or reenact comparable relationship dynamics in their adult lives, assuming either the role of the abuser or the victim, thereby perpetuating a cycle of abuse that spans across multiple generations. It is imperative to comprehend this theory thoroughly in order to disrupt the cycle and implement tailored interventions for individuals who have undergone childhood emotional abuse.

Understanding the unresolved issues related to the intricate connection between childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) in young adults is of utmost importance for the development of a more in depth comprehension in this area. Advocacy efforts need to be focused on the formulation of policies that explicitly recognize emotional abuse and integrate preventive measures within the realms of educational and healthcare systems. Gender disparities must be taken into account as a critical factor during the design of interventions, and the conduction of longitudinal studies is essential for delving into the extensive impact that childhood emotional abuse can have on intimate partner relationships over the course of a lifetime. The establishment of community resources, the provision of support for family-centered interventions, and the consideration of cross-cultural diversities are indispensable elements in fostering a nurturing environment and disrupting the cycle of violence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Impact of Childhood Maltreatment on IPV

The impact of childhood emotional abuse on intimate partner violence (IPV) is intricate and multifaceted, as evidenced by a multitude of research studies conducted in this field. Shields et al. (2020) elucidated that childhood emotional abuse, in conjunction with childhood physical abuse (CPA) and childhood sexual abuse (CSA), exhibited significant associations with IPV occurrence in adulthood among both male and female individuals. Millett et al. (2013) underscored that individuals with a history of child maltreatment, particularly males, exhibited heightened rates of perpetrating IPV. The study indicated that child maltreatment exerted both direct and mediated impacts on the perpetration of IPV among men, primarily through violent delinquent behaviors, with no such effects observed among women. Discoveries by Richards et al. (2017) demonstrated that emotional abuse autonomously foretells both IPV victimization and perpetration. Gender-based variations are evident in the impact of maltreatment on IPV perpetration, and accounting for the overlap between victims

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and offenders is pivotal in comprehending the link between childhood maltreatment and subsequent involvement in IPV.

Gender Differences in IPV Perpetration and Victimization

Gender disparities in perpetrating and being victimized by intimate partner violence (IPV) are not only substantial but also intricate. According to Ahmadabadi et al. (2020), there exists a noteworthy temporal correlation between experiencing IPV as a victim and subsequently developing mental health disorders, with varying connections discerned between males and females. In females, IPV has been linked to the emergence of new instances of major depressive disorder, particularly among those who did not have a prior history of depression, whereas in males, the onset of anxiety disorders was predicted by emotional abuse. In their work, Chandra et al. (2023) provide valuable insights into the prevalence and manifestations of IPV encountered by women, showing that approximately 30% of women reported experiencing at least one form of violence, be it physical, emotional, or sexual. Among these, physical violence - particularly in the form of slapping - emerged as the most prevalent, followed by emotional and sexual violence. In a related study, Cater et al. (2015) explored the repercussions of childhood exposure to intimate partner violence on mental health issues in adulthood, revealing that around 28.1% of participants disclosed such exposure. Notably, women tended to endure more severe forms of violence compared to men, underscoring gender-based distinctions in the experiences of childhood exposure to IPV and the consequent mental health ramifications.

Psychological and Mental Health Impacts:

Childhood emotional abuse and neglect are prevalent forms of maltreatment with significant implications for mental health outcomes, as highlighted by Kumari (2020). According to Kumari, emotional abuse is more frequently reported by adults compared to other forms of abuse and exerts a wide-ranging negative impact on mental health. It functions as a transdiagnostic risk factor for psychiatric disorders, especially anxiety and depression, thereby emphasizing the enduring effects of emotional abuse on mental well-being throughout one's lifespan. Delving into the impact of childhood abuse on psychosis outcomes, Comacchio et al. (2019) point out gender differences in symptom manifestation and outcomes. They note that women who experienced childhood abuse tend to display more positive and mood-related symptoms, an earlier onset of symptoms, and higher rates of suicide attempts, while men exhibit more negative symptoms, substance abuse, and cognitive impairments. Furthermore, childhood emotional abuse and neglect serve as predictors of symptoms and functioning in individuals with psychosis, underscoring the necessity for trauma-informed care within mental health settings. Research conducted by Caron et al. (2017) delves into the relationship between child maltreatment, IPV victimization, and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) among young adults. Their study indicates that child maltreatment poses a significant risk factor for NSSI, with IPV victimization playing a mediating role in this association.

Perceptions, Stereotypes, and Perspectives

Perceptions, stereotypes, and perspectives revolving around intimate partner violence (IPV) are subject to a multitude of influences originating from various factors. The study conducted by Hammock et al. (2016) brings to light the impact of gender stereotypes on the perceptions of IPV, illustrating that male perpetrators are typically subjected to more negative judgment compared to female perpetrators. Furthermore, the evaluation of physical aggression tends to be more disparaging than that of psychological aggression. Laskey et al.

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(2019) draw attention to the lack of focus on male victims and individuals from the LGBTQ+ community within the realm of IPV literature and support services. The predominant emphasis on female victims in heterosexual relationships has resulted in an imbalance in both research endeavors and the provision of support services. Bhattacharjee & Gopal (2022) conducted a study delving into the experiences of young male and female survivors of IPV, unveiling common themes such as manipulation of reality, exertion of control, and influence on personal attributes and future relationships. In their research, Ler et al. (2017) explored the prevalence and determinants of IPV among young women in India. They identified a plethora of communal, individual, societal and relational factors that contribute to IPV occurrences, including lack of educational opportunities, early marriage, socio-economic inequalities, partner's alcohol consumption, exposure to parental IPV, controlling conduct, and instances of terminated pregnancies.

Impact on Relationship Functioning:

Childhood abuse has profound implications for social and relationship functioning, persisting well into adulthood and exerting a significant influence on the quality of interpersonal relationships. In their study, Tardif-Williams et al. (2015) illuminate the correlation between childhood abuse and the impairment of social and relationship functioning, a phenomenon that can endure throughout adulthood. Moreover, the level of attachment security emerges as a crucial predictor of relationship satisfaction, indicating that individuals with insecure attachment styles tend to experience lower relationship satisfaction levels, regardless of gender or history of abuse, as pointed out by Miskiewicz et al. (2016). Delving deeper into this subject, McClure & Parmenter (2017) explore the intricate relationship between childhood abuse and the perpetration and victimization of intimate partner violence (IPV) within college dating relationships. Their findings reveal that various forms of childhood abuse, such as emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and anxious attachment styles, are closely associated with both perpetration and victimization of IPV.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To understand the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization among young adults.
- To examine the gender differences between Intimate partner violence (IPV)-Victimization and Perpetration.

Hypothesis

- H1: Young adults who experienced higher levels of childhood emotional abuse (CEA) are more likely to report both victimization (IVPV) and perpetration (IPPV) of intimate partner violence (IPV).
- H2: There will be a gender difference in the reported levels of Victimization by Intimate Partner Violence (IVPV), with females reporting higher scores compared to males, and higher levels of perpetration will be reported by males.
- H0: There will be no significant differences in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) scores of the male and female participants.

Research Design

The current study employed a correlational research design and adopted a quantitative approach to examine the data.

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Sample

The study involved 120 participants, evenly split between genders (60 males, 60 females). Stratified random sampling ensured equal gender representation for comparative analysis. Ages ranged from 18 to 27. Relationship statuses: 55% had past relationships but weren't currently dating (66 individuals), 42.5% were currently dating (51 individuals), and 2.5% were cohabitating (3 individuals). No married participants or non-binary individuals were included.

Measures

- **Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood Questionnaire (REACH):** In 2023, Karen Goodall and Vilas Sawrikar developed the Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood Questionnaire (REACH) to assess childhood emotional abuse (CEA). The REACH has 23 items categorized into threat, ignoring, humiliation/denigration, scapegoating, antipathy, and overcontrol/conditionality. It shows strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha 0.93–0.98), strong convergent validity, and stability over time (test-retest reliability 0.85–0.99).
- **The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales – Short Form (CTS2S):** This was developed by Murray A. Straus, Suzanne K. Steinmetz, and Richard J. Gelles in 1979. It assesses intimate partner violence (IPV) with 20 items covering negotiation, physical assault, psychological aggression, sexual coercion, and injury. The CTS2S shows strong internal consistency (alpha 0.70–0.90), convergent validity, concurrent validity, and stability over time.

Variables

Independent Variables:

- *Childhood Emotional Abuse (CEA):* Emotional maltreatment during childhood and adolescence by parents or caregivers, including behaviors like threat, ignoring, humiliation/denigration, scapegoating, antipathy, and overcontrol/conditionality. Assessed via the Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood Questionnaire (REACH), employing self-report items on a 5-point scale.
- *Gender:* Self-reported classification of individuals as male, female, or other, based on socially constructed roles, behaviors, and identities.

Dependent Variables:

- *Victimization by Intimate Partner Violence (IVPV):* Experience of various forms of violence or abuse by an intimate partner, encompassing physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. Assessed using self-report scales like the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales – Short Form (CTS2S), gauging the frequency of different tactics during conflicts within intimate relationships.
- *Perpetration of Intimate Partner Violence (IPPV):* Engagement in various forms of violence or abuse towards an intimate partner, including physical aggression, psychological abuse, sexual coercion, and controlling behaviors. Utilizes the same self-report scales as IVPV, such as the CTS2S, to assess frequency and severity of behaviors directed at the intimate partner.

Procedure

The research began by recruiting 120 participants. Participants were informed of the

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voluntary nature of their involvement and the confidentiality of their data before providing consent. The primary aim was to investigate the correlation between childhood emotional abuse (CEA) and both experiencing and perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV) among young individuals. CEA was measured using the Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood Questionnaire (REACH), while IPV perpetration and victimization were assessed using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales – Short Form (CTS2S), chosen for their reliability and validity. Data was collected offline and online through Google Forms. Respondents completed the questionnaires individually. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25, employing statistical methods like the Mann-Whitney U Test and Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation to explore connections and variations among variables.

RESULT

Table 1.1 Descriptives of the Variables

	Gender	TOTAL REACH SCORE	Total of CTS2S Scale	Victimization (V) Scores	Perpetration (P) Scores
N	Female	60	60	60	60
	Male	60	60	60	60
Mean	Female	2.19	49.2	23.3	25.9
	Male	2.17	54.8	28.0	26.8
Median	Female	1.89	31.0	12.0	18.5
	Male	1.83	23.5	11.5	15.0
Maximum	Female	4.61	272	152	120
	Male	4.57	444	204	240
Shapiro-Wilk W	Female	0.888	0.791	0.728	0.830
	Male	0.880	0.644	0.658	0.617
Shapiro-Wilk p	Female	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
	Male	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001

Table 1.1 presents descriptive statistics for childhood emotional abuse, conflict tactics, victimization, and perpetration scores across 60 females and 60 males. Females report slightly higher mean REACH scores (2.19) compared to males (2.17), while conflict tactics mean scores are similar, with males slightly higher (54.8 vs. 49.2 for females). Females have lower mean victimization (23.3 vs. 28.0) and perpetration scores (25.9 vs. 26.8) than males. Median values reinforce these trends, with females showing lower values across all measures. Shapiro-Wilk tests indicate non-normal distributions, suggesting the use of non-parametric tests like Mann-Whitney U and Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation for analysis.

Table 1.2 Correlation between Childhood Emotional Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

		TOTAL REACH SCORE	Total of CTS2S Scale	Victimization (V) Scores	Perpetration (P) Scores
TOTAL REACH SCORE	Spearman's rho	—			
	df	—			
	p-value	—			
Total of CTS2S Scale	Spearman's rho	0.272**	—		
	df	118	—		
	p-value	0.003	—		
Victimization (V) Scores	Spearman's rho	0.237**	0.981***	—	
	df	118	118	—	
	p-value	0.009	< .001	—	

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		TOTAL REACH SCORE	Total of CTS2S Scale	Victimization (V) Scores	Perpetration (P) Scores
Perpetration (P) Scores	Spearman's rho	0.285**	0.982***	0.937***	—
	df	118	118	118	—
	p-value	0.002	<.001	<.001	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The correlation matrix in Table 1.2 examines the relationship between childhood emotional abuse (CEA) measured by the REACH Scale and intimate partner violence (IPV) measured by Victimization (V) and Perpetration (P) Scores from the CTS2S Scale. Significant positive correlations were found between REACH Scores and CTS2S Scores ($\rho = 0.272$, $p = 0.003$), as well as between REACH Scores and both V Scores ($\rho = 0.237$, $p = 0.009$) and P Scores ($\rho = 0.285$, $p = 0.002$). These results suggest that individuals who experienced more childhood emotional abuse are more likely to engage in diverse conflict tactics within intimate relationships and report both victimization and perpetration in IPV scenarios, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Table 1.3 Independent Samples T-Test of gender and Perpetration Scores

		Statistic	p
Perpetration (P) Scores	Mann-Whitney U	1755	0.594

Note: $H_a \mu_{\text{Female}} < \mu_{\text{Male}}$

Table 1.3 presents the results of an independent samples t-test examining the perpetration scores of intimate partner violence (IPV) by gender. The Mann-Whitney U test yielded a p-value of 0.594, suggesting no significant difference in scores between genders. Therefore, the second hypothesis has been rejected. In essence, gender doesn't appear to significantly influence IPV perpetration levels in this study.

Table 1.4 Independent Samples T-Test of gender and Victimization Scores

		Statistic	p
Victimization (V) Scores	Mann-Whitney U	1764	0.576

Note: $H_a \mu_{\text{Female}} < \mu_{\text{Male}}$

Table 1.4 presents the results of an independent samples t-test examining gender differences in victimization scores related to intimate partner violence (IPV). The Mann-Whitney U test yielded a test statistic of 1764 and a p-value of 0.576. With a p-value exceeding the standard significance threshold of 0.05, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis or support the second hypothesis. Thus, it can be inferred that gender does not significantly impact reported levels of IPV victimization.

DISCUSSION

The study investigated gender differences in childhood emotional abuse (CEA) and its relationship with intimate partner violence (IPV) among young adults. Findings revealed slightly higher CEA scores for females (mean = 2.19) compared to males (mean = 2.17), while males showed higher conflict tactic scores (mean = 54.8) than females (mean = 49.2). Females reported lower victimization (mean = 23.3) and perpetration of IPV (mean = 25.9) compared to males (victimization mean = 28.0, perpetration mean = 26.8). Significant positive correlations were found between CEA and conflict tactics ($\rho = 0.272$),

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victimization ($\rho = 0.237$), and perpetration of IPV ($\rho = 0.285$). However, Mann-Whitney U tests yielded inconclusive results for gender disparities in perpetration ($U = 1755$, $p = 0.594$) and victimization ($U = 1764$, $p = 0.576$).

These findings align with previous research indicating links between childhood maltreatment, gender differences, and IPV. Literature suggests a strong correlation between CEA and IPV involvement. Studies by Shields et al. (2020) and Richards et al. (2017) support this correlation. Ahmadabadi et al. (2020) and Chandra et al. (2023) highlight gender-specific patterns in IPV perpetration and victimization. However, gender alone may not significantly influence IPV involvement in this study, challenging conventional assumptions.

The study underscores the need for comprehensive exploration of CEA, gender differences, and IPV. Societal norms and expectations may influence conflict resolution strategies and IPV involvement. Effective interventions addressing childhood trauma and providing adaptive coping mechanisms are crucial. While gender plays a role, individual trauma histories, mental well-being, and relationship dynamics are also important factors.

Implications of the study extend to IPV prevention, intervention, and research. Trauma-informed practices and tailored support are essential for individuals affected by childhood maltreatment. Gender-specific approaches must account for the distinct experiences of male and female survivors. A holistic approach considering individual and contextual factors is necessary for effective IPV prevention and intervention efforts. This research contributes valuable insights to combat IPV and underscores the need for ongoing research and collaboration in this field.

Limitations

While shedding light on the complex relationship between childhood emotional abuse (CEA), gender differences, and intimate partner violence (IPV), this study has notable limitations affecting its interpretation and generalizability. Firstly, reliance on self-report measures introduces response and social desirability biases, potentially leading to underreporting of abuse or violence due to embarrassment or recall inaccuracies. Additionally, the cross-sectional design hinders causal inference between CEA and IPV perpetration/victimization, urging for longitudinal studies. The study's focus on young adults and its modest sample size of 120 participants may limit the extrapolation of findings across different age groups or genders. Moreover, the use of a convenience sample from a single geographical location restricts the generalizability of findings to broader demographics. Lastly, the binary classification of gender overlooks non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals, necessitating more inclusive approaches in future research.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study highlights the link between CEA, gender dynamics, and IPV among emerging adults. It reveals that higher CEA levels correlate with increased conflict strategies and IPV involvement. While gender differences exist in CEA and conflict strategies, they do not significantly affect IPV perpetration or victimization in this sample, suggesting other contributing factors. Tailored interventions addressing CEA trauma can potentially mitigate future IPV perpetration and victimization.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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