

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

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ABSTRACT

This correlational study investigates the potential associations between childhood trauma experiences and adult attachment styles. Utilizing the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), data were collected from a sample of 175 participants. Correlation analyses examined the relationships between various subscales of childhood trauma (including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect) and adult attachment dimensions (including closeness, dependence, and anxiety). Surprisingly, no significant correlations were found between childhood trauma and attachment styles, except for a significant positive relationship between physical neglect and anxiety in attachment. These findings highlight the complexity of the interplay between childhood trauma and adult attachment, suggesting the need for further investigation in this area. Understanding the psychological implications of childhood trauma remains crucial for developing targeted interventions aimed at promoting resilience and well-being among trauma survivors.

Keywords: *Trauma, Childhood Trauma, Attachment Styles, Adult Relationships, Romantic relationships, Physical abuse, Physical Neglect, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Emotional Neglect*

Childhood experiences play a pivotal role in shaping the foundation upon which individuals build their relationships and navigate the complexities of human connection. Central to this developmental journey is the concept of attachment, a fundamental psychological framework that elucidates how early interactions with caregivers shape individuals' emotional bonds and relational patterns throughout life. In recent decades, a growing body of research has explored the enduring impact of childhood trauma on the formation of adult attachment styles and the subsequent consequences for interpersonal relationships.

Attachment theory, initially formulated by John Bowlby, posits that secure attachments established in infancy provide a secure base from which individuals explore the world and form trusting relationships, laying the groundwork for emotional resilience and well-being. However, when this critical developmental process is disrupted by traumatic experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or separation, the repercussions resonate far beyond childhood as

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Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

they can give rise to insecure attachment styles characterized by anxiety, avoidance, or ambivalence. As such, understanding the profound impact of childhood trauma on adult attachment has emerged as a pressing concern within the field of psychology, warranting thorough investigation and nuanced exploration.

This research paper endeavors to delve into the intricate interplay between childhood trauma, adult attachment styles, and the subsequent implications for interpersonal relationships. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives, empirical research findings, and clinical insights, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted pathways through which early adversity shapes individuals' relational landscapes and influences the quality and dynamics of their adult relationships.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles and relationships within an urban population. By examining a diverse sample of individuals aged 18 years and above, encompassing both males and females, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how various forms of childhood adversity influence attachment orientations in adulthood. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore the underlying mechanisms and moderators that mediate the relationship between childhood trauma and adult attachment, shedding light on the complex interplay between early experiences and later relational patterns.

This study holds significant implications for both theoretical research and clinical practice in psychology. By elucidating the long-term consequences of childhood trauma on adult attachment, the findings will contribute to the advancement of attachment theory and developmental psychology, enhancing our understanding of the enduring effects of early adversity on human behavior. Moreover, the insights gleaned from this study can inform therapeutic interventions aimed at promoting secure attachment and mitigating the adverse effects of childhood trauma on individuals' relational well-being, ultimately fostering healthier and more fulfilling interpersonal connections.

Thesis Statement

Childhood trauma significantly shapes adult attachment styles and interpersonal relationships, as individuals who have experienced early adversity often exhibit distinct patterns of attachment characterized by low feelings of comfort with closeness and intimacy, low feelings of comfort with depending on others and a belief that others will be available when needed and heightened worry about being rejected or unloved, influencing the dynamics and quality of their adult relationships.

Hypothesis

- Individuals who have experienced high levels of childhood trauma will exhibit lower scores on measures of closeness in adult attachment styles compared to individuals with lower levels of childhood trauma.
- Individuals who have experienced high levels of childhood trauma will exhibit lower scores on measures of dependency in adult attachment styles compared to individuals with lower levels of childhood trauma.
- Individuals who have experienced high levels of childhood trauma will exhibit higher scores on measures of anxiety in adult attachment styles compared to individuals with lower levels of childhood trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Attachment theory, initially developed by John Bowlby, posits that early experiences with caregivers profoundly shape an individual's ability to form and maintain relationships throughout life. It shapes individuals' internal working models of relationships, influencing their beliefs, expectations, and behaviors in social contexts. This literature review explores the extensive body of research examining the lasting effects of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles and the subsequent influence on interpersonal relationships.

Attachment Theory Overview

Attachment theory suggests that secure attachments formed during infancy, characterized by feelings of trust, security, and emotional intimacy, provide a secure base for healthy social and emotional development. In contrast, experiences of childhood trauma, ranging from physical and emotional abuse to neglect and parental absence, disrupt the formation of secure attachments, giving rise to patterns of insecure attachment characterized by anxiety, avoidance, or disorganization. These insecure attachment styles, deeply rooted in early adversity, manifest in individuals' relational patterns and interpersonal dynamics in adulthood, often leading to challenges in forming and maintaining close, fulfilling relationships.

Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles

- **Anxious Attachment:** Research by Bowlby and Ainsworth established that children who experience inconsistent caregiving or frequent separations may develop anxious attachment patterns. These individuals often exhibit a heightened fear of abandonment and seek excessive reassurance in their adult relationships.
- **Avoidant Attachment:** Children who endure neglect or emotional unavailability may develop avoidant attachment styles. Adults with avoidant attachment tend to maintain emotional distance in relationships, avoiding intimacy and minimizing the importance of close connections.
- **Disorganized Attachment:** Severe trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse, can lead to disorganized attachment. Adults with disorganized attachment often struggle with conflicting behaviors, such as intense fear of abandonment coupled with avoidance of closeness, resulting in unpredictable and chaotic relationships.

Neurobiological Mechanisms

- **Impact on Brain Development:** Neuroimaging studies have uncovered that childhood trauma can induce changes in both the structure and function of brain regions linked to emotional regulation and attachment. These findings offer a neurobiological foundation for the observed patterns in attachment. (1) (2) Findings indicate that trauma could serve as a significant risk factor contributing to structural abnormalities, particularly evident in variations in cortical thickness within frontal and cingulate regions among children. (3)
- **Role of Cortisol and Stress Response:** Childhood trauma has been associated with heightened levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, potentially influencing the emergence of insecure attachment styles. Fearful attachment showed the lowest cortisol output, while preoccupied attachment exhibited the highest levels alongside a more consistent cortisol profile. (4) Research findings suggest that attachment style plays a role in shaping the expression of HPA dysregulation. Cortisol output was observed to be at its lowest within the fearful group, followed by the preoccupied

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

group, while both secure and dismissive groups exhibited higher levels of cortisol. (5) The dysregulation of the stress response system may impair an individual's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships.

Interpersonal Consequences

Impact on Romantic Relationships: Multiple studies have consistently shown a connection between childhood trauma and challenges in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships. Those with a history of trauma may encounter difficulties with trust, communication, and emotional intimacy. Recent research has also indicated that survivors of childhood trauma might face lower relationship quality, issues with intimacy, and difficulties adjusting socially. (6)

The research indicates that adults who retrospectively disclose more childhood maltreatment tend to have more dysfunctional relationships (DiLillo et al., 2009). Survivors of childhood emotional maltreatment (CEM) often express feeling less secure and are more hesitant to engage in adult relationships (Kapelelis and Paivio, 2011). They frequently report lower levels of trust (DiLillo et al., 2009), increased conflict (Briere and Rickards, 2007), heightened relationship dissatisfaction (Perry et al., 2007; Maneta et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2019), and are more prone to relationship breakdowns (Mullen et al., 1996). (7)

In a study, it was discovered that the subdimensions of childhood trauma including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect, showed positive associations with fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment styles. Conversely, these variables exhibited negative correlations with the secure attachment style. (8)

Women who reported experiencing childhood abuse tended to exhibit lower quality in their past interpersonal relationships, along with higher levels of fear regarding intimacy, and greater symptomatology related to trauma compared to women who did not report such abuse. (9)

Friendship Dynamics:

Childhood trauma can also influence the quality of friendships in adulthood. Patterns of anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachment may manifest in friendships, affecting the ability to establish and maintain supportive social connections.

Emotional trauma during childhood appears to exert a more significant impact on interpersonal difficulties among adult patients with depression and anxiety disorders compared to childhood physical trauma. Additionally, a history of childhood physical abuse tends to be associated with dominant interpersonal patterns rather than submissive ones in adulthood. (10)

Implications for Intervention and Treatment

Therapeutic Approaches: Psychotherapy, especially attachment-based interventions, holds promise in aiding individuals with a history of childhood trauma to cultivate more secure attachment styles. (11)

Mindfulness-based therapies and trauma-focused interventions have proven effective in addressing the enduring effects of early adversity. (12) (13)

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

Preventive Measures:

Early intervention and support for children exposed to trauma may mitigate the long-term consequences on attachment styles. Strengthening parental caregiving and providing resources for families at risk can play a crucial role in preventing insecure attachment patterns from developing.

Conclusion

This literature review highlights the complex interplay between childhood trauma, adult attachment styles, and interpersonal relationships. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing targeted interventions aimed at promoting healthy attachment and improving the overall well-being of individuals who have experienced early adversity.

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

The study included a sample of 175 participants (male- 28, females- 146, non-binary-1) aged 18 years and above (mean age- 27 years). Participants were recruited from urban areas across diverse cities to ensure a representative demographic.

Instruments:

- **Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ):** The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, a widely recognized and validated instrument developed by Bernstein et al. (1997), was employed to assess participants' experiences of childhood trauma. The CTQ comprises of 28 self-report items that inquire about different forms of maltreatment, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect. Approximately 5 minutes is required to complete the test. A 5-point Likert scale is used for the responses which range from Never True to Very Often True.
- **Adult Attachment Scale (AAS):** The Adult Attachment Scale, as developed by Collins and Read (1990), was utilized to evaluate adult attachment styles. The scale consists of 18 items scored on a 5 point likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not at all characteristic to 5 = very characteristic. It measures adult attachment style dimensions including comfort with closeness and intimacy (Close subscale), comfort with depending on others (Depend subscale), and worry about being rejected or unloved (Anxiety subscale). It measures adult attachment styles named "Secure", "Anxious" and "Avoidant", defined as:
 - Secure = high scores on Close and Depend subscales, low score on Anxiety subscale
 - Anxious = high score on Anxiety subscale, moderate scores on Close and Depend subscales
 - Avoidant = low scores on Close, Depend, and Anxiety subscales

Procedure

- **Recruitment:** Participants were recruited through online platforms, ensuring a diverse representation from urban areas.
- **Informed Consent:** Prior to participation, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.
- **Administration of Questionnaires:** Participants completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and the Adult Attachment Scale through a secure online survey

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

platform. Clear instructions were provided to ensure accurate and thoughtful responses.

- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To uphold participant confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected. Participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and used solely for research purposes.
- **Ethical Considerations:** The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by relevant institutional review boards. Ethical considerations included informed consent, participant anonymity, and the option to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using statistical analysis (e.g., SPSS). Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analyses, were conducted to explore relationships between childhood trauma and adult attachment styles.

Validity and Reliability:

The CTQ and AAS have demonstrated high validity and reliability in previous research.

- **CTQ:** Reliability for the CTQ is good with high internal consistency scores. Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse have reported coefficients of .93-.95, .88-.92, .84-.89, and .81-.86, respectively. Over a 3 ½ month period, the test-retest coefficient was calculated at close to 0.80. Factor analysis tests on the five-factor CTQ model showed structural invariance which demonstrates good validity.
- **AAS:** Collins & Read (1990) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .69 for Close, .75 for Depend, and .72 for Anxiety. Test-retest correlations for a 2-month period were .68 for Close, .71 for Depend, and .52 for Anxiety.

Data Exclusion Criteria:

Participants who provided incomplete or inconsistent responses were excluded from the analysis to maintain the integrity of the data.

Limitations:

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, such as potential recall bias in self-reported childhood trauma and the generalizability of findings limited to an urban population.

RESULTS

Correlation between CTQ and Close Scale:

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a non-significant very small positive relationship between CTQ scores and Close Scale scores, with $r(173) = .0187$, $p = .805$.

Parameter	Value
Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	0.01875
r^2	0.0003515
P-value	0.8055
Covariance	0.7573
Sample size (n)	175
Statistic	0.2466

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

Correlation between CTQ and Depend Scale:

Similarly, there was a non-significant very small positive relationship between CTQ scores and Depend Scale scores, with $r(173) = .0349$, $p = .647$.

Parameter	Value
Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	0.03487
r^2	0.001216
P-value	0.6469
Covariance	1.7197
Sample size (n)	175
Statistic	0.4589

Correlation between CTQ and Anxiety Scale

Additionally, the Pearson correlation analysis indicated a non-significant small positive relationship between CTQ scores and Anxiety Scale scores, with $r(173) = .124$, $p = .102$.

Parameter	Value
Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	0.1242
r^2	0.01542
P-value	0.1015
Covariance	6.8617
Sample size (n)	175
Statistic	1.6463

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between childhood trauma and various psychological constructs, as measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and three different scales: the Close Scale, the Depend Scale, and the Anxiety Scale.

Lack of Significant Correlations:

Contrary to our hypotheses, the results revealed non-significant positive correlations between CTQ scores and scores on the Close Scale, Depend Scale, and Anxiety Scale. These findings suggest that higher levels of reported childhood trauma were associated with slightly higher scores on measures of closeness, dependence, and anxiety, although these relationships did not reach statistical significance.

Possible Explanations:

Several factors may contribute to the lack of significant correlations observed in this study. Firstly, the sample size may have limited the statistical power to detect small or moderate effects. Additionally, the measures used in this study may not have fully captured the complexities of the constructs under investigation, potentially attenuating the observed relationships. Moreover, the nature of childhood trauma itself is multifaceted, and different types or severities of trauma may have differential impacts on attachment styles and anxiety levels, which could further obscure the observed associations.

Further Analysis:

The correlation analysis revealed significant findings regarding the relationship between the Close subscale in the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) and various subscales of childhood trauma as measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

Firstly, a significant large positive correlation was observed between the Close subscale in AAS and the Physical Abuse scale in CTQ ($r(173) = 1$, $p < .001$). This suggests that individuals who reported higher levels of physical abuse during childhood tend to exhibit a stronger inclination toward closeness in adult attachment relationships.

Conversely, the correlation between the Close subscale in AAS and the Physical Neglect and Emotional Neglect scales in CTQ yielded non-significant very small positive relationships ($r(173) = .0398$, $p = .601$; $r(173) = .0159$, $p = .835$). This implies that the experiences of physical and emotional neglect during childhood may have minimal impact on an individual's tendency toward closeness in adult attachment relationships.

Similarly, the correlation between the Close subscale in AAS and the Emotional Abuse and Sexual Abuse scales in CTQ also resulted in non-significant very small negative relationships ($r(173) = .0422$, $p = .579$; $r(173) = .0225$, $p = .767$). This suggests that experiences of emotional abuse and sexual abuse during childhood may have limited influence on an individual's propensity for closeness in adult attachment relationships.

The correlation analysis examined the relationship between the Depend subscale in the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) and various subscales of childhood trauma measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).

Firstly, a significant small positive correlation was found between the Depend subscale in AAS and the Physical Abuse scale in CTQ ($r(173) = .156$, $p = .040$). This suggests that individuals who experienced higher levels of physical abuse during childhood may tend to exhibit greater dependence in their adult attachment relationships.

Conversely, non-significant very small positive relationships were observed between the Depend subscale in AAS and the Emotional Abuse and Physical Neglect scales in CTQ ($r(173) = .0311$, $p = .683$; $r(173) = .0848$, $p = .264$). These results indicate that experiences of emotional abuse and physical neglect during childhood may have minimal impact on an individual's tendency toward dependence in adult attachment relationships.

Similarly, non-significant very small negative relationships were found between the Depend subscale in AAS and the Sexual Abuse and Emotional Neglect scales in CTQ ($r(173) = .062$, $p = .415$; $r(173) = .0312$, $p = .682$). This suggests that experiences of sexual abuse and emotional neglect during childhood may also have limited influence on an individual's propensity for dependence in adult attachment relationships.

The correlation analysis explored the relationship between the Anxiety subscale in the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) and various subscales of childhood trauma measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).

Firstly, a non-significant very small negative relationship was found between the Anxiety subscale in AAS and the Physical Abuse scale in CTQ ($r(173) = .0183$, $p = .810$). This suggests that there is no substantial association between experiences of physical abuse during childhood and levels of anxiety in adult attachment relationships.

Regarding other forms of childhood trauma, non-significant small positive relationships were observed between the Anxiety subscale in AAS and the Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Emotional Neglect scales in CTQ ($r(173) = .109$, $p = .151$; $r(173) = .0813$, $p =$

Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

.285; $r(173) = .141$, $p = .063$). These results indicate that experiences of emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional neglect during childhood may have a minor influence on levels of anxiety in adult attachment relationships, but this association did not reach statistical significance in this sample.

However, a significant small positive relationship was found between the Anxiety subscale in AAS and the Physical Neglect scale in CTQ ($r(173) = .215$, $p = .004$). This suggests that individuals who experienced higher levels of physical neglect during childhood may tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety in their adult attachment relationships.

Implications and Future Directions:

Despite the non-significant findings, the study contributes to our understanding of the nuanced relationship between childhood trauma and psychological functioning in adulthood. Future research employing larger sample sizes, more comprehensive measures, and longitudinal designs could provide further insight into the long-term effects of childhood trauma on attachment styles and anxiety levels. Additionally, investigating potential mediators or moderators of these relationships may help elucidate the underlying mechanisms driving these associations.

CONCLUSION

In summary, although this study did not reveal significant correlations between childhood trauma and attachment styles, its outcomes emphasize the ongoing need for exploration in this domain. Comprehensive comprehension of the psychological aftermath of childhood trauma remains pivotal for guiding interventions aimed at fostering resilience and overall well-being among survivors of traumatic experiences.

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Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Attachment Styles in Adults

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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