

Research Paper

Exploring Emotional Abuse During Childhood in Relation with Adult Personality

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ABSTRACT

Childhood emotional abuse is a subtle yet profoundly damaging form of maltreatment that often leaves no visible physical scars but significantly shapes long-term psychological and personality outcomes. Unlike more overt forms of abuse, emotional abuse frequently occurs through patterns of verbal hostility, chronic criticism, humiliation, emotional neglect, rejection, and the persistent absence of emotional safety. This paper explores how such early adverse relational experiences influence adult personality development across emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal domains. Drawing from developmental psychology, attachment theory, trauma research, and trait-based personality models, the study examines the mechanisms through which early emotional trauma contributes to enduring patterns such as low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, insecure attachment styles, maladaptive coping strategies, and interpersonal difficulties. Attention is particularly given to the association between childhood emotional abuse and adult personality traits including heightened neuroticism, reduced agreeableness, perfectionistic tendencies, avoidance behaviours, and increased sensitivity to rejection. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this paper highlights emotional abuse as not only a precursor to clinical disorders but also a developmental risk factor shaping broader personality architecture. The findings underscore the need for early identification, culturally sensitive assessment, trauma-informed therapeutic interventions, and emotionally supportive caregiving environments to mitigate long-term psychological harm and promote adaptive personality development across the lifespan.

Keywords: *Adult Personality, Childhood Trauma, Emotional Abuse, Psychological Development, Trauma Impact*

Childhood is a critical period for emotional, social, and personality development. During this phase, children learn how to interpret emotions, build self-worth, and form expectations about relationships. While physical and sexual abuse have long been recognized as harmful, emotional abuse often remains overlooked because it lacks visible signs. Yet repeated exposure to criticism, humiliation, emotional neglect, or rejection can profoundly shape how individuals view themselves and others throughout life.

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Emotional abuse disrupts the child's developing sense of safety and belonging. According to attachment theory proposed by John Bowlby, children require consistent emotional responsiveness from caregivers to form secure attachments. When caregivers are emotionally unavailable, hostile, or invalidating, children may internalize beliefs of unworthiness and develop insecure attachment styles that persist into adulthood. These early relational patterns often influence adult personality traits such as dependency, emotional avoidance, or fear of intimacy.

From a personality development perspective, early emotional environments play a crucial role in shaping enduring behavioural and emotional tendencies. Research grounded in trait theory, particularly the Five-Factor Model introduced by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae, suggests that adverse childhood experiences can influence traits such as neuroticism, agreeableness, and emotional stability. Emotional abuse may increase vulnerability to anxiety, mood instability, and interpersonal sensitivity in adulthood.

Despite growing awareness, emotional abuse remains underreported and under-researched, especially in non-clinical populations. Many adults normalize their childhood experiences or fail to recognize them as abusive. Understanding the long-term personality consequences of emotional abuse is essential not only for academic knowledge but also for informing mental health interventions, prevention strategies, and social policies aimed at protecting children and supporting survivors.

Significance

This study is significant because emotional abuse is one of the most prevalent yet least visible forms of childhood maltreatment. Unlike physical harm, emotional abuse is often normalized within families and cultures, making it harder to identify and address. By focusing specifically on emotional abuse rather than general trauma, the study highlights a frequently minimized form of harm that can have equally serious psychological consequences.

The research also contributes to the understanding of how early emotional environments shape adult personality structures. Many studies focus on clinical outcomes such as depression or anxiety, but fewer explore how emotional abuse influences broader personality traits, interpersonal styles, and emotional functioning in everyday adult life. This perspective helps move beyond pathology and toward understanding long-term personality development.

Another important aspect of this study is its relevance to mental health practice. Therapists, counsellors, and educators often encounter adults struggling with low self-worth, emotional instability, or relationship difficulties without recognizing emotional abuse as a possible root cause. By strengthening the theoretical and empirical link between childhood emotional abuse and adult personality patterns, this study supports more trauma-informed approaches to assessment and intervention.

Finally, the study holds social and policy relevance. Greater recognition of emotional abuse can inform child protection policies, parenting programs, and school-based mental health initiatives. When emotional abuse is acknowledged as a serious developmental risk factor, prevention efforts can be designed to promote emotionally supportive caregiving environments, ultimately contributing to healthier personality development and improved adult well-being.

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Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult personality traits and emotional functioning.
2. To identify common personality patterns and interpersonal behaviours associated with experiences of emotional abuse in childhood.
3. To highlight the long-term psychological consequences of emotional abuse for adult identity formation and relational well-being.

Rationale

The rationale for this study lies in the growing recognition that emotional abuse during childhood produces long-lasting psychological effects that often remain invisible yet deeply rooted. Many adults' experiencing chronic self-doubt, emotional instability, or relational difficulties do not trace these struggles back to early emotional neglect or verbal mistreatment because such experiences are frequently normalized within families and cultures. This study is grounded in developmental and trauma-informed perspectives, particularly drawing from psychosocial development theory proposed by Erik Erikson, which emphasizes the role of early emotional environments in shaping identity and personality across the lifespan. By focusing on emotional abuse rather than more visible forms of maltreatment, this research aims to broaden understanding of how subtle, repeated emotional harm can shape adult personality functioning and relational patterns in meaningful ways.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Childhood traumatic experiences of emotional abuse and personality development have had connections that have attracted high rates of interest across developmental psychology, clinical research, and personality theories. The findings from the current research emphasize that adverse or traumatic childhood experiences are events that are rarely isolated; instead, they are relational with broader developmental systems shaped by family dynamics, community environments, and sociocultural contexts (Ann S. Masten, 2014). Early adversities or traumatic experiences taking place as a child, often accumulates over time and interacts in core with conditions like genetic predispositions and individual vulnerabilities, as well as contextual factors such as limited or no access to social support or socio-economic disadvantages (Dante Cicchetti & Fred A. Rogosch, 2002). These intersections influence and contribute in shaping long-term patterns of emotional functioning, self- concept and interpersonal behaviour of the child as an individual. Consequently, trauma caused due to emotional abuse in childhood is now widely understood as not only a precursor to clinical disorders but also a risk factor in development with enduring implications for emotional regulation, stress responsivity, and relational functioning across the lifespan of the children as adults. (Suniya S. Luthar et al., 2000).

Emotional abuse, threat, harm, or neglect that children might face during early and sensitive periods of their growth have lasting and deep impact in shaping their adult personality (David P. Bernstein et al., 2003). Previous researches and conceptualizations in psychodynamic way of trauma suggests, it has had emphasis on intrapsychic conflict and repression caused due to emotional abuse (Sigmund Freud, 1920), whereas contemporary developmental psychopathological frameworks usually conceptualize trauma as a process that is dynamic and transactional involving interactions among biological vulnerability, environmental stressors, and protective resources (Dante Cicchetti & Sheree L. Toth, 2009). This shift moves beyond the view of trauma as a discrete event toward understanding the role of adversity that becomes embedded in developmental systems and shapes emotional

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regulation, cognitive schemas related to safety and threat, stress response, and interpersonal functioning (Ann S. Masten, 2014).

The constant research identifies maltreatment in childhood as a severe public health concern worldwide. Surveys on a large scale indicate that substantial proportions of individuals across regions report experiences of emotional abuse, neglect during childhood, although prevalence rates vary according to cultural norms and methodological approaches (World Health Organization, 2020). When trying to go in depth to understand the historic form of childhood adversities, such as emotional abuse, have gained recognition as a threat during developmental period, with evidence showing that the absence of emotional responsiveness, warmth and closure which may lead to lower ability to build secure relationships, form attachment, emotional awareness, and self-worth (Jonice Webb, 2012; Mary Ainsworth, 1978). A strong longitudinal and meta-analytic body suggest through evidence that experiencing emotional abuse in childhood may lead to an increased likelihood of developing mental issues like depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress symptoms, substance misuse, temperament issues and personality related difficulties in adulthood (Catherine Widom et al., 2007; Andrea Danese & Bruce S. McEwen, 2012). In addition to diagnostic result outcomes, early emotional adversities have been associated with forming poor social relationships, challenges in functioning, occupational adjustment, and lower overall quality of life (Sara Jaffee, 2017). Researches in field of neuro-psychology clearly suggests that prolonged stress during sensitive periods of development can interrupt with proper functioning of stress-response systems, such as the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis (HPA), as well as neural circuits involved in emotional regulation and threat or harm detection (Bruce S. McEwen, 2007). These types of neurobiological changes help understanding enduring patterns of development of emotional reactivity, heightened interpersonal vigilance, and habitual coping styles that gradually consolidate into stable personality traits over time.

Researchers have developed better tools to systematically capture experiences of traumatic experiences like emotional abuse in their childhood. The Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood (REACH) Questionnaire, is a recently developed instrument that specifically measures emotional abuse during childhood in terms of its severity and frequency. Constant work on The Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood (REACH) Questionnaire (Goodall & Sawrikar, 2023) indicates that it demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties, including reliability and emerging evidence of validity across different samples and contexts. While retrospective assessments are vulnerable to recall bias and mood-related memory distortions (Linda J. Levine, 1997), consistent findings across multiple measurement approaches are used to enhance confidence in the links observed between trauma–outcome associations.

Trait-based models represent a professional consensus on how to best conceptualize enduring individual differences — for example, the Five-Factor Model of Paul T. Costa Jr. and Robert R. McCrae (1992). This framework encompasses Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness as broad stable dimensions of an individual personality as an adult. The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) translates these traits into a usable scale that has shown cross-cultural validity and temporal stability (Robert R. McCrae et al., 2005). Even though psychological traits do not tend to change much over time, there is evidence that long-term exposure to serious environmental stressors like emotional abuse, can have long-lasting effects on how traits form and have adverse effects on personality of an adult (Brent W. Roberts et al., 2006).

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To the contrary, empirical studies show deep associations between childhood abuse and neuroticism (reflections of greater emotional reactivity, and negative affectivity and sensitivity to stressors) (Terrie E. Moffitt et al., 2010). Extraversion: Associations are weaker but suggest emotional neglect and abuse may predict social withdrawal and decreased positive affect (Avshalom Caspi et al., 2003) Results for Openness to Experience are inconsistent, with some studies showing reduced openness following long-term adversities and others null effects, emphasizing the moderating roles of educational opportunities and cultural norms (Robert R. McCrae, 2004).

Emotional abuse in childhood has been linked to more negative relationships with agreeableness and conscientiousness, which may be a result of trauma-induced difficulties with self-regulation and interpersonal trust (Joshua J. Jackson et al., 2012). Most importantly, different types of maltreatment seem to have different effects on personality development. The relationship between emotional abuse and neglect is more strongly associated with internalizing tendencies such as Neuroticism, while betrayal or violation experiences, including sexual abuse, correlate with inter-personal mistrust and relational difficulties captured in lower Agreeableness (Christine Heim et al., 2001).

These different patterns underscore the inadequacy of treating childhood trauma related to emotional abuse as a unitary construct, and rather emphasize examining trauma subtypes in relation to personality outcomes. The correlations between emotional abuse and personality are further moderated by cultural factors. According to Robert R. McCrae and Antonio Terracciano (2005), although the Five-Factor framework can be used in most cultures, how features are expressed and how they are valued in society might differ from one culture to another. Past recording and cross-cultural comparisons of abuse exposure are made more difficult by parenting techniques, norms around expressing feelings, and discipline strategies, all of which impact the occurrence and perception of childhood adversity (Heidi Keller, 2013). Because of cultural differences in parenting norms and emotional expressions, findings derived from REACH and personality tests should be interpreted with caution across cultural contexts.

Methodological problems continue to restrict the literature. Many studies use cross-sectional designs as well as self-report measures that are sensitive to recall error and current mood effects (Scott O. Lilienfeld et al. 2012). Samples are frequently collected from clinical or selective groups, which limits their generalization to community samples. Also, few research include comprehensive emotional abuse analysis and detailed personality characterization into the same methodological framework. The integration of The Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood (REACH) Questionnaire with the NEO-FFI enables the proper examination of specific emotional abuse profiles in direct relation to distinct personality characteristics in non-clinical populations, addressing important gaps in previous research results.

Attachment theory offers a crucial psychological bridge between early trauma caused by emotional abuse and future development in personality. Deep perceptions of oneself and others are built by initial interactions with loved ones, and these foundations impact demands in interpersonal connections throughout life. John Bowlby (1969) claims that child's attachment types vary by the availability and attentiveness of their caregivers. Insecure patterns of attachment can be the result of traumatic nursing experiences filled with neglect, instability, or danger (Mary Main & Erik Hesse, 1990). According to Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer (2007), such types of attachment are linked to lifelong

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characteristics such as increased neuroticism, interpersonal mistrust, emotional suppression, and challenges with intimacy in adulthood.

In particular, disorganized attachment has been connected to inappropriate interpersonal tactics and unstable affect regulation, both of which might eventually show up as personality deficiencies. Trauma-related changes in emotion regulation are another important means of connecting adverse childhood experiences to adult character traits. Emotional control skills develop quickly during the early years of life as a result of continuous interactions with caregivers. Children may not develop appropriate techniques for regulating stress if their caregivers are absentminded or disruptive (James J. Gross, 1998). Studies have shown that common behaviours like impulsivity and anxiousness can develop in children who were neglected as infants and go on to have trouble understanding, managing, and coping with their emotions (Kim L. Gratz & Lizabeth Roemer, 2004). Increased paranoia and decreased conscientiousness in maturity are directly associated with these long-lasting problems with controlling emotions and behaviours. Forming cognitive schemas in the aftermath of trauma has a multiplicative effect on how a person's personality evolves.

Attachment disorders emerge in faulty perceptions of oneself (such as "I am unworthy"), intimate perceptions (such as "people are dangerous"), and broad evaluations (such as "The world is unsafe"). In Aaron T. Beck's (1967) models of cognitive development, these schemas impact how we perceive, pay attention, and react emotionally. The link between childhood abuse and later personality traits, especially Agreeableness and Neuroticism, may be affected by trauma-related beliefs, as demonstrated by longitudinal studies (Jeffrey Young et al., 2003). Individuals who adopt hostile or mistrustful schemas may demonstrate decreased agreement and more interpersonal protectiveness, while poor self-schemas trigger chronic reactions to negative emotion. It appears that trauma experienced early in life has a greater impact on your personality than trauma experienced later.

As the brains of kids continue to develop, they rely heavily on their parents or caregivers for everything. Initial abuse may lead to permanent modifications in some of the brain parts that are associated with emotions and decision-making. These changes may result in long-term differences in how easily people become agitated, how effectively they suppress their emotions, and how sensitive they are to the challenges, leading to a link between childhood trauma and adult personality traits. The chronic risk model offers an additional structure for analysing psychological trauma relationships. Instead of focusing on individual bad experiences, this model stresses the cumulative and mutual impacts of various stressors during development (Arnold J. Sameroff, 2000). Children who have experienced various kinds of maltreatment, as well as external obstacles such as poverty, family instability, or parental psychopathology, are more likely to develop regressive personality characteristics as adults. This prolonged stress is linked to increased Neuroticism and lower Conscientiousness which indicates emotional weakness and decreased autonomy (Avshalom Caspi et al., 2016). They highlight the necessity of taking into account the whole developmental system in which trauma occurs, instead of focusing just on single negative events.

Not everyone who experiences emotional hardship during the early phase of life, develops maladaptive personality traits. Caring relationships, positive environments for learning, and personal traits like cognitive flexibility and emotion control abilities may assist in reducing the negative effects of trauma (Ann S. Masten, 2014). Longitudinal studies show that firm attachment bonds established later in life, like ones with peers, may help in reducing trauma-

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related consequences on interpersonal trust and emotional stability (Michael Rutter 2012). These resilience processes show that personality development is flexible and open to contextual change, even after severe hardship. Differences in sensitivity to adverse temperament effects are shown more clearly by the interaction between genes and the environment study. Certain genetic variants may increase susceptibility to outside stresses, intensifying the effects of childhood abuse on feelings and mental attributes (Avshalom Caspi et al., 2003).

Individuals with certain stress response variations have stronger associations with early trauma and subsequent neuroticism. They lend authority to various susceptibility theories, claiming that individuals are more sensitive to both negative and positive external stimuli than others. This stance opposes only deficit-based theories by illustrating diversity in developmental paths after trauma. Recent research explores the function of psychological dissociation and identity problems in shaping personality structure. Onno van der Hart et al. (2006) have connected chronic abuse to changes in self-concept coherence and autobiographical memory integration. These imbalances show unstable self-representations, emotional numbness, or identity dispersion, all are conceptually related to increased neuroticism and poorer conscientiousness. They emphasize the importance of trauma-driven perspectives in understanding wider personality structure across category diagnosis.

Recent integrative models propose that The Rating of Emotional Abuse in Childhood (REACH) Questionnaire with the NEO-FFI Five-Factor Inventory can be used in tandem within study designs to investigate associations between early emotional abuse and adult personality traits (Goodall & Sawrikar, 2023; Paul T. Costa Jr. & Robert R. McCrae, 1992). A major void in the literature exists due to the underutilization of such methods, especially in community-based samples and those from non-Western regions. Better developmental models of the ways in which early trauma embeds in long-lasting interpersonal and emotional patterns can be advanced by filling this gap.

Research Gap

Existing literature on childhood maltreatment often prioritizes physical and sexual abuse, with emotional abuse receiving comparatively limited empirical attention. Many studies categorize emotional abuse as a secondary variable within broader “adverse childhood experiences,” which makes it difficult to isolate its specific psychological and personality-related outcomes. This lack of focused attention contributes to the continued minimization of emotional abuse as a serious developmental risk factor.

Another major gap lies in the overemphasis on clinical disorders rather than everyday personality functioning. While numerous studies link childhood trauma to depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress, fewer investigations explore how emotional abuse shapes enduring personality traits such as emotional sensitivity, interpersonal avoidance, or perfectionistic tendencies. As a result, the long-term influence of emotional abuse on adult personality structures remains under-theorized and under-measured.

There is also limited research exploring cultural and contextual variations in emotional abuse. Behaviours such as harsh criticism, emotional withdrawal, or conditional affection may be culturally normalized, which complicates the identification of emotional abuse and its psychological consequences. Most existing research is based on Western populations, creating a gap in understanding how emotional abuse manifests and impacts personality development in diverse sociocultural settings.

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Finally, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal interpretations. Longitudinal research that tracks emotional abuse from childhood into adult personality development is still scarce. This gap restricts our ability to understand how early emotional harm evolves into stable personality patterns over time and how protective factors such as supportive relationships or therapy may buffer these long-term effects.

Key Findings

1. Childhood emotional abuse is significantly associated with higher levels of neuroticism, reflecting increased emotional reactivity, anxiety, and vulnerability to stress in adulthood.
2. Individuals exposed to emotional abuse during early developmental periods often demonstrate persistent negative self-concepts, including chronic self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness.
3. Emotional abuse is strongly linked to insecure attachment patterns, which later manifest as fear of abandonment, difficulty trusting others, and unstable interpersonal relationships.
4. Adults with histories of emotional abuse frequently report greater difficulties in emotional regulation, including impulsivity, emotional suppression, or heightened affective instability.
5. Emotional neglect and verbal humiliation during childhood are associated with lower levels of agreeableness, often reflected in interpersonal mistrust and guarded relational styles.
6. Prolonged exposure to emotionally invalidating environments is connected to reduced conscientiousness, particularly in domains involving self-discipline, goal persistence, and behavioural regulation.
7. Emotional abuse contributes to maladaptive cognitive schemas such as “I am unworthy” or “others are unsafe,” which influence long-term personality functioning and relational behaviour.
8. Neurobiological research suggests that chronic early stress may dysregulate stress-response systems, including the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, contributing to enduring emotional sensitivity and stress responsivity.
9. Emotional abuse does not operate in isolation; cumulative exposure to multiple adversities increases the likelihood of maladaptive personality trait development.
10. Cultural norms and parenting practices moderate the expression and interpretation of emotional abuse, influencing how personality traits manifest across sociocultural contexts.
11. Retrospective self-report measures, while subject to recall bias, consistently demonstrate associations between perceived emotional abuse and adult personality traits across diverse samples.
12. Genetic susceptibility and environmental sensitivity may intensify the relationship between emotional abuse and later personality outcomes, supporting differential susceptibility models.
13. Protective factors such as supportive adult relationships, secure peer bonds, and therapeutic intervention significantly buffer the long-term personality impact of childhood emotional abuse.
14. Not all individuals exposed to emotional abuse develop maladaptive traits, indicating that personality development remains flexible and influenced by resilience processes across the lifespan.

Future Implications

1. Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-method designs to establish clearer causal relationships between childhood emotional abuse and adult personality development, reducing reliance on retrospective self-reports.
2. There is a strong need to integrate trauma assessment tools with personality inventories within the same empirical frameworks to examine how specific forms of emotional abuse correspond to distinct personality traits.
3. Studies must expand into diverse cultural and community-based populations to understand how sociocultural norms shape both the experience of emotional abuse and the expression of personality traits.
4. Clinical interventions should adopt trauma-informed, personality-focused therapeutic approaches that address emotional regulation deficits, maladaptive self-schemas, and insecure attachment patterns rooted in early abuse.
5. Preventive strategies should prioritize early emotional literacy programs and caregiver education, emphasizing emotionally responsive parenting to reduce the long-term developmental impact of emotional maltreatment.

CONCLUSION

Childhood emotional abuse is a powerful yet often overlooked developmental risk factor that shapes adult personality in enduring ways. Experiences of chronic criticism, rejection, and emotional neglect influence emotional regulation, self-concept, attachment patterns, and stress responsiveness, which may consolidate into stable traits such as heightened neuroticism, interpersonal mistrust, and reduced self-regulatory capacity.

However, personality development remains flexible rather than permanently determined by early trauma. Protective relationships, resilience processes, and trauma-informed interventions can alter developmental pathways and support healthier adult personality functioning. Recognizing and addressing emotional abuse early is therefore essential for promoting long-term psychological well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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