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The Effects of Experienced Childhood Maternal Abuse on Adult Attachment Styles

The relationship between experienced maternal abuse and the development of an insecure attachment style was examined. Data was collected via self-report questionnaires in a large, urban college campus. The questionnaires used were the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-2, Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) and Attachment Questionnaire (AQ, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The sample included 81 females and 86 males, ranging in age from 18-57 years old. No significant correlation was found between the experience of maternal abuse and the development of a fearful attachment style. The results did support a significant correlation between maternal abuse and the development of an insecure-dismissive attachment style. Future research is needed with more diverse samples that consist of more variability in abuse.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (2003, April 1) has estimated that 903,000 children in the United States were victims of abuse or neglect in 2001. With such a strikingly large number of victims, it is important that we fully understand the long-term impacts of abuse, including how experiencing abuse will affect these children in all aspects of their adult lives, including attachment style (Levendowsky & Shapiro, 1999). Insufficient psychological and emotional development is often the result of one of two experiences: trauma inflicted by another individual or abuse by a caregiver. Abuse perpetrated by a caregiver often results in childhood psychopathology and insecure attachment styles later in life (Levendowsky & Shapiro, 1999). There has been research

conducted on maternal abuse and maltreatment, as well as on insecure attachment, but little has been done to link the two topics together (Morton & Browne, 1998). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between experienced maternal abuse and insecure attachment.

The theoretical foundation for attachment theory is largely based on the work of John Bowlby and the empirical work of Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby was interested in the effects of early separation from parents on child development. Bowlby's clinical observations led him to create a theory on the attachment behavioral system (as cited in Pervin, 2002). According to this theory, an infant goes through a series of innate phases

in the development of an attachment to a maternal caregiver. Interactions between the infant and primary caregiver provides the basis for the development of expectations of future relationships (Pervin, 2002).

Mary Ainsworth is a psychologist who conducted a study in which she observed the interaction between infants and their mothers, which is known as the Strange Situation. The Strange Situation is an observable measurement that places an infant in a series of introductions, separations, and reunions with their mother and an adult stranger (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stanton, 1971; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Ainsworth observed the interaction between infant and mother in different situations and placed the infant in one of four attachment categories: secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, insecure-ambivalent attachment, and insecure-disorganized attachment. Ainsworth concluded that a securely attached infant has a healthy relationship with their mother (Ainsworth et al., 1971). Insecure-avoidant infants show insecurity by avoiding the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1979). Insecure-ambivalent infants first cling to their caregiver and then push them aside with anger (Ainsworth et al., 1971). Insecure-disorganized infants show patterns of avoidance and fearfulness from their caregiver (Ainsworth, 1979).

It is important to look at the findings of Ainsworth because researchers have found that early attachments in children seem to foreshadow later functioning and social behavior (Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001; Sroufe, 2002). It has been shown that male children with an insecure-attachment style display both more attention-seeking and more disruptive and aggressive behavior when interacting with peers than do securely-attached boys (David & Lyons-Ruth, 2005). Research also shows that attachment security provides a foundation for care-oriented feelings and caregiving behaviors, whereas attachment insecurity suppresses or interferes with compassionate caregiving (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2005).

Abuse is defined as any action by an

individual that may result in the physical or emotional harm of another individual (Lowenthal, 1996; Yanowitz, Monte, & Tribble, 2003). An individual's attachment style can be either secure or insecure. A child can have a secure, an avoidant (sometimes called detached), or a preoccupied attachment style (George, 1996). An avoidant/detached child views themselves positively and others negatively (George, 1996). A child with a preoccupied attachment style has a negative self-image and either a negative or positive image of others (Berk, 2000).

Attachment styles for adults are similar to that of children, only they are labeled differently. There are three categories of adult insecure attachment: dismissive (also called avoidant), anxious/ambivalent (also called preoccupied), and fearful. Adults who develop insecure attachment styles are thought to have experienced insensitive or inconsistent care from their parents during childhood (Volling, Notaro, & Larsen 1998). Children that have an avoidant/detached attachment style will have a dismissive attachment style as an adult (Berk, 2000). An adult with a dismissive attachment style has a positive self-image and a negative image of others (Muller & Lemieux, 2000). An adult with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style views himself negatively and others positively (Muller & Lemieux, 2000). An adult, who has an anxious/ambivalent attachment style, had a preoccupied attachment style in childhood (Berk, 2000). Finally, fearful adults, who were labeled as having a preoccupied attachment style as children (Berk, 2000), have a negative self-image and a negative image of others as well (Muller & Lemieux, 2000).

Parenting styles are shown to have a great effect on the behaviors of a child, especially if that child has been abused. Maltreated children are at risk for developing a wide range of problems and disorders (Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). Individuals that experience abuse as a child have been shown to have poor emotion regulation, attachment problems, and problems in peer relations (Azar, 2002). Being physically

abused has been linked with children's anxiety, personality problems, depression, conduct disorder, and delinquency (Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). Later, during the adult years, maltreated children show increased violence toward other adults, dating partners, and marital partners, as well as increased substance abuse, anxiety, and depression (Malinowsky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993).

There are several mediating factors thought to link childhood abuse to adult attachment styles. Several studies established a link between poor social skills in children and previous history of abuse (Rowe & Eckenrode, 1999; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Yanowitz et al., 2003). DiTommaso, Brannen-McNulty, Ross, and Burgess (2003) observed that in a measure of social skills, those whose scores reflected good social skills also self-reported a secure attachment style. Conversely, those whose scores indicated poor social skills self-reported an insecure attachment style—primarily fearful attachment. These attachment styles reportedly carried over into adulthood (DiTommaso et al., 2003).

One negative repercussion of childhood abuse is the inability of the child to form effective coping strategies (Levendowsky & Shapiro, 1999). According to Crittenden (1992), a child forms their internal representational models through their experiences. If a child is abused they will form a model reflective of the way in which they dealt with these experiences (Crittenden, 1992). This model will most likely lead to future use of maladaptive coping strategies, resulting in poor interpersonal relationships later in life (Levendowsky & Shapiro, 1999).

A child can be the victim of witnessed or experienced abuse, both contributing to the child's development of a specific type of attachment style when older (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999). Maternal abuse plays a significant role in the disintegration of a secure attachment between mothers and children. Rapoza and Malley (1996) examined the impact of maternal violence on adult attachment styles. The

researchers concluded that maternal abuse is significantly correlated with dismissive and preoccupied attachment styles. The participants labeled as such reported difficulties in their present interpersonal relationships (Rapoza & Malley, 1996). In addition, a proceeding study found that maltreatment from a maternal figure to a child significantly damages any chance of a secure attachment between mother and child, consequently interfering with future emotional relationship attachments and conflict resolutions (Morton & Browne, 1998).

There have been few studies on the differences of how males and females internalize abuse. Research conducted by Rapoza and Malley (1996) found that there is a significant difference in male and female attachment styles due to maternal abuse. The female participants reported having dismissive and fearful attachment styles whereas the male participants reported no significant relationship between their attachment styles and experiences of maternal maltreatment. This is one isolated study with no other explicit research to support it, so it is important to be wary of its implications.

In this study, we hypothesize that:

1. Experiencing maternal abuse will be positively correlated with insecure-fearful attachment in both males and females.
2. Experiencing maternal abuse will be positively correlated with insecure-dismissive attachment in both males and females.
3. Abused females will score higher than abused males on scales of insecure attachment.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 81 females and 86 males ranging in age from 18 to 57 years old, with an average age of 23.18 years old. Approximately one-third of the sample was college students completing a psychology research methods course at a large urban

university in the Northeast. In order to generate a data set for class research projects, these students completed a set of self-report measures assessing information on attachment style and frequency of experienced maternal abuse. In addition, each student was expected to recruit three male and three female volunteers to contribute to the class data set. APA ethical guidelines were followed throughout this process. The average respondent was single, 23 years old, Caucasian, and a student who self-reported to be from a middle to upper middle socioeconomic class.

Measures

For the purposes of the present study, the measures used were the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales and the Attachment Questionnaire. Experienced maternal abuse was measured. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-2), adapted from Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1996), has six 24-item scales, each of which has subscales for measuring the frequency with which particular conflict tactics have been used or experienced. These subscales include: a) tactics observed during childhood (negotiation, psychological aggression, and physical aggression in the mother to father and father to mother relationship), b) tactics experienced during childhood (negotiation, psychological aggression, and physical aggression in the mother to you and father to you relationship), and c) tactics experienced and perpetrated in the dating relationship (negotiation, psychological aggression, and physical aggression from you to partner and partner to you). Response scales for each item range from 0 (never) to 25 (more than 20 times). Alpha reliability coefficients for the internal consistency reliability of this questionnaire are relatively high, between 0.79 and 0.95 (Straus et al., 1996). High correlations between the test and abuse variables support its construct validity (Straus et al., 1996).

Adult attachment style was measured by the Attachment Questionnaire (AQ, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This questionnaire consists of four short paragraphs with 7-point response scales (ranging from 1 “Not at all characteristic

of you” to 7 “extremely characteristic of you”) yielding ordinal (continuous) scores for four attachment types (secure, dismissive, anxious-ambivalent, and fearful); these scores are useful for calculating correlations between endorsement of particular attachment styles and other variables. In a fifth item, participants indicate which of the four types is most like themselves; this response yields a categorical score, which might be used as an independent variable in an analysis of variance – although except with a very large sample, this approach is often not very useful. Alpha reliability coefficients of these attachment ratings were computed in its first use by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and found to be high—they ranged from 0.87 to 0.95. Other questionnaires designed to determine attachment styles have confirmed the AQ’s convergent validity (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Data Analysis

In order to address the hypotheses for the current study, the following data analyses were conducted: Pearson r correlations were calculated among the two study variables and a t test was conducted to determine gender differences with experienced maternal abuse as the independent variable and adult attachment style as the dependent variable.

Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for all the major study variables, separately by gender. As can be seen, the mean for experienced abuse is higher for males than females. When the four different attachment styles (secure, dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful) were divided by gender, it can be seen that females scored higher on scales of both secure and fearful attachment, while males scored higher on scales of dismissive and preoccupied attachment.

Table 2 provides the correlation matrix for the correlations between the Attachment Styles scores and the Conflict Tactics Scales scores for experienced psychological and physical maternal abuse in males and females. As can be seen,

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics by gender.*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Experienced Maternal Psychological Abuse			
Females	85	21.61	8.51
Males	81	17.90	7.17
Experienced Maternal Physical Abuse			
Females	81	4.86	7.06
Males	85	8.28	9.49
MALL			
Females	81	22.77	12.5
Males	85	29.90	15.11
Secure Attachment			
Females	80	4.46	1.53
Males	86	4.27	1.62
Dismissive Attach.			
Females	80	3.36	1.77
Males	86	3.87	1.69
Preoccupied Attach.			
Females	80	2.63	1.66
Males	86	3.10	1.81
Fearful Attach.			
Females	80	3.21	2.07
Males	86	2.93	1.80

there is no significant correlation between experienced maternal abuse and fearful attachment style in males or females. However, there is a significant correlation between dismissive attachment style in both males and females to experienced maternal physical abuse.

Table 3 presents the results of a *t* test, with gender as the independent variable and the scores on each of the four attachment styles as the dependent variables. These analyses revealed that gender did not contribute significantly to the development of any of the attachment styles.

Discussion

The findings did not support the hypothesis that there is a correlation between experienced maternal abuse and the development of an insecure-fearful attachment. The findings did not support the hypothesis that abused females would score higher than abused males on scales of insecure attachment, as well. The results did support the hypothesis that there is a correlation between dismissive attachment style in both males and females and experienced maternal physical abuse. The results also support another study in which maternal abuse was significantly correlated with dismissive and preoccupied attachment styles (Rapoza & Malley, 1996).

Compared to the work of Ainsworth (1979), the results did show that maltreatment in some form at childhood would lead to an insecure attachment style later in life. The results of this study also correlate with the results of other studies in which a link was established between poor social skills in children and previous history of abuse (Rowe & Eckenrode, 1999; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Yanowitz et al., 2003). Current research has shown that developing an insecure attachment type as a child will cause negative effects on attachment and interpersonal relationships later in life (Malinowsky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993).

There are a few different reasons for why this study did not work. One such reason is that there was not enough variability in reported abuse. The reason for this variability could be that

Table 2. Correlation between experienced maternal abuse and attachment styles.

Variables	5. experienced maternal psychological abuse	6. experienced maternal physical abuse
1. secure attachment style	-.076	-.053
males	-.121	-.055
females	.015	-.021
2. dismissive attachment style	.111	.316**
males	.115	.355**
females	.040	.223*
3. preoccupied attachment style	.060	-.043
males	-.043	-.079
females	.129	-.062
4. fearful attachment style	.046	-.039
males	.028	-.101
females	.104	.066

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

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

Table 3. *t*-test for gender and attachment style

Variables	Females		Males		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Secure	4.460	1.530	4.270	1.620	0.799	0.425
Dismissive	3.360	1.770	3.870	1.690	-1.895	0.060
Preoccupied	2.630	1.660	3.100	1.810	-1.783	0.076
Fearful	3.210	2.070	2.930	1.800	0.935	0.351

participants were not willing to report abuse or that their interpretations of abuse differ from that of this study's definition of abuse. While responding to the questionnaires, participants might not have reported abuse for a number of reasons, such as protecting their parents, not wanting others to know about their abuse, or to remember being abused would be too hurtful for them to bring up past memories.

Another possibility of why this study didn't work is that the average participant was a college student who reported to be from middle to upper socioeconomic class. This shows that the sample was drawn from a homogeneous population and therefore, not enough variability in the responses of the participant. What was not taken into consideration from these participants is that their

definition of abuse could vary because of religious beliefs, cultural differences, or parenting styles. What can be considered abuse to one person might not be considered abuse to another.

One last possible reason why this study did not prove to work is that the scaling techniques for measuring the variables of abuse and attachment were inadequate. The format of the questionnaires that were used forced a broad response of being abused or not. Forms of abuse, such as neglect or sexual abuse, were also unable to be measured with these questionnaires. There are also errors that come along with questionnaires of self-report. Self-report limits the interpretation to perceptions of abuse. This problem could have been avoided if the methods

of obtaining data were by using interviews because the respondent might have answered more thoroughly if they were talking to an actual person.

Suggestions for future research could be that using a more diverse sample would lead to different data obtained. Using a population that has previously reported abuse, such as Child Services, would be better in finding correlations between abuse and attachment styles. If abused populations, such as violent environments, were targeted for data, there might have been a positive correlation found between experienced maternal abuse and insecure-fearful attachment styles.

Future research can also include longitudinal studies, following infant-parent relations from birth until adolescence. Parenting style and attachment style can be looked at and recorded from these studies and can be compared to the child's adult attachment style and relationships to other people when they grow up. Future research related to the topic of maternal abuse and attachment style can also be done by conducting twin studies, in which the attachment style of each twin would be observed and then compared to how they were raised. Observations of different attachment styles in infancy could explain the different factors that effect attachment style as an adult. Again, more diverse samples compared to this study would be needed in order to get a better picture of how maternal abuse effects attachment style in adults and children.

The findings of this study can be applied in different clinical settings. The findings can be used by community psychologists to form parenting programs. These programs can help teach parents how to better raise their children and how to form a healthy attachment style with them at a young age, since it has been shown that early attachments as a child foreshadow behavior and social functioning as an adult (Schneider et al., 2001). Another type of program to help parents is to train them before they become a parent. This type of program would allow parents to be counseled on different parenting methods and learn how the attachment process works in

an infant. Other types of programs can teach psychologists to better understand patients of different attachment style backgrounds. Understanding a person's attachment style in adulthood and childhood could help the psychologist better assess the present problems a patient is trying to cope with.

Although some of the findings in this study did not correlate with the present research, the finding that experiencing maternal abuse is positively correlated with dismissive and preoccupied attachment styles in both males and females did support the present research (Rapoza & Malley, 1996). The present study shows a correlation between developing an unhealthy attachment style as an adult and undergoing abuse or maltreatment as a child. According to current research and the research done by Ainsworth on attachment theory, proper measures should be taken when raising a child in order for that child to develop a secure attachment style in childhood and to develop a secure attachment style later in life (Ainsworth, 1979; Pervin, 2002).

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