

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 5 (2010) 1741–1745

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCPCG-2010

The effect of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles, infidelity tendency, romantic jealousy and self-esteem

Cigdem Yumbul^a, Seyma Cavusoglu^a, Birgul Geyimci^{a,*}^a*Psikoloji Istanbul Center for Counseling, Training and Research, Halaskargazi cd., Celikpalas apt.,120/2, Sisli, Istanbul, Turkey*

Received January 16, 2010; revised February 4, 2010; accepted March 19, 2010

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to assess how individuals' childhood traumas (emotional, physical, sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect) affect their attachment styles, infidelity tendency, romantic jealousy and self-esteem. The study was conducted to 150 individuals (91 females, 59 males) including married individuals, individuals in a dating relationship and singles. The analyses demonstrated a significant difference in childhood trauma scores in terms of adult attachment styles and a significant positive correlation between trauma scores and infidelity. The study did not demonstrate any correlation between childhood trauma, romantic jealousy and self-esteem.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Keywords: Childhood Trauma, Adult Attachment Styles, Infidelity Tendency, Romantic Jealousy, Self-Esteem

1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers have shown more interest in exploring the nature of romantic relationships and the factors contributing to forming healthy intimate relationships. This study explores how childhood trauma affects adult attachment styles, romantic jealousy, infidelity tendency and self esteem in romantic relationships.

Sar & Ozturk (2005) define trauma as “a threatening experience which turns an adaptive process to a maladaptive one. According to their view “this is the condition when upsetting and unpredicted situational and/or continuous factors interrupt the psycho sociological experiencing suddenly and significantly, and interfere with the coping capacity of the person for a moment or a period of time”. Childhood trauma, assessed through neglect and abuse, may interfere with later functioning of individuals in adult life. The effect of childhood trauma may be observed in the ways individuals form relationships with their family, friends and especially partners, as well.

Attachment theory is one of the leading points in the field, which explains how the attachment between children and their caretaker affects the way they make bonds to other attachment figures, such as their partners, in adulthood. According to Bowlby's (1973) attachment model, the bond between the child and the caretaker has impact on child's psychosocial development and functioning in adulthood. Bowlby (1973) and Hazan & Shaver (1987)

* Cigdem Yumbul, MS. Tel.: +90 212 233 2838; fax: +90 212 233 2889.

E-mail address: cymbul@psikolojiistanbul.com.

determined three different attachment styles including secure, anxious-amivalent and avoidant style, due to the attachment patterns between the child and the caretaker. Bartholomew ve Horowitz (1991) improved this typology into four typed model for adult attachment styles in romantic relationships: Secure attachment and Insecure attachment (anxious/preoccupied, fearful/avoidant, and dismissive/avoidant).

Briere (1996)'s self-trauma model demonstrates how trauma disrupts the development of child, especially his/her attachment system. Attachment system is one of the main action systems which regulates threat responses and prevent them from interfering daily action systems. When the attachment system is impaired, the main focus of individuals turns to issues such as security and safety, and they fall behind in the development of other areas such as exploration, learning and interpersonal relationships (daily action systems) (Lyons-Ruth, 2003). The adults, who were traumatized in childhood, may develop unhealthy attachment styles with their romantic partners due to this disruption to their attachment system.

Rosenberg (1965) and social-learning theorists defined self-esteem in terms of a stable sense of personal worth or worthiness. Bowlby (1973) claimed early attachment styles affect the style of adulthood self esteem in relationships. The studies by numerous researchers also showed the effect of childhood trauma on future adult psychopathology, especially low self-esteem (e.g. Gross & Keller, 1992).

The literature shows many studies regarding the relationship between romantic jealousy, attachment styles (e.g. Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997) in romantic relations and self-esteem. In their studies, Pines (1998) and White (1981) found a negative correlation between romantic jealousy and self esteem whereas Bringle & Buunk (1985) did not demonstrate a significant relationship between romantic jealousy and self-esteem. In the process of reviewing the literature, we found insufficient data regarding the effect of childhood trauma on these variables. Abuse and neglect may damage children's sense of safety and security, and when they approach other attachment figures later in life, they may struggle interpreting the degree of threat correctly and defensive subsystems comes up to stage (flight, freeze, fight, submission) (Lyons-Ruth, 2003). We believe excessive romantic jealousy and infidelity tendency may manifest themselves as forms of defensive subsystems in romantic relationships. For this reason, we studied the effect of childhood trauma on adult romantic relationships (which is a part of daily functioning system) assessing adult attachment styles, romantic jealousy and infidelity tendency.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and fifty subjects (91 females, 59 males), ranging in age from 19 to 58 with a mean of 31 (SD=9.3) for females and a mean of 30.3 (SD= 1) for males, were selected randomly for the study. The relationship status of the participants were married (%42), in a dating relationship (not married) %28 and single (%30). Nearly one third of our sample had Undergraduate (%55) and Graduate (%14) degree, and the rest were elementary school (%1), middle school (%7) and high school (%23) graduates.

2.1.1. Assessment Measures

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, Relationships Scales Questionnaire, Romantic Jealousy Questionnaire, Infidelity Tendency Scale, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, and a demographic form were used as the instruments to assess the variables.

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) (Bernstein et. al., 1994) is a 28-item questionnaire which assess childhood trauma through five subcategories; emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and physical and emotional neglect.

Relationships Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) measures adult attachment style through 30 questions assessing four different attachment styles: Secure attachment style, Anxious/Preoccupied attachment style, Dismissive/Avoidant attachment style, Fearful/Avoidant attachment style, Dismissive/Avoidant attachment style. RSQ was adapted to Turkish by Sümer & Güngör (1999).

We used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (1965), a 10-item questionnaire, to assess self-esteem. Higher scores in the scale indicate higher self-esteem.

Romantic Jealousy Questionnaire (RJQ) is a 7 degreeed Likert type questionnaire which was developed by Pines & Aronson (1983). It contains 5 different subscales (jealousy level, jealousy reactions, coping behavior with jealousy, effects of jealousy and causes of jealousy). RJO was adapted to Turkish by Demirtas (2004).

Infidelity Tendency Scale (Polat, 2006) contains 30 questions to measure infidelity tendency in romantic relationships.

2.1.1.1. Statistical Analyses

Results were analyzed using ANOVA (Analyses of Variance), Pearson's correlation and Independent Sample T-Test.

3. Results

The analyses demonstrated significant differences in education levels in terms of CTQ total ($F= 2.577$, $p<.05$) and CTQ Physical Neglect ($F= 4.145$, $p<.01$).

The mean CTQ total scores of the four different attachment styles are found to be significantly different ($F=2.881$, $p<.05$). There is also a significant difference in CTQ Physical Neglect Subscale scores in terms of Secure and Dismissive /Avoidant Attachment Styles.

Table 1 shows the average CTQ Total and CTQ Subgroup scores for the participants with different adult attachment styles. The results shows a significant difference in CTQ Total and Physical Neglect, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse Subscale mean scores for attachment styles (secure and insecure). The insecurely attached group was formed by adding the scores of Anxious/Preoccupied, Dismissive/Avoidant and Fearful/Avoidant groups.

Table 1. CTQ and Adult Attachment Styles

	P	Secure		Insecure	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
CTQ Total	0.002	7.1	1.3	7.9	1.7
CTQ Emotional Neglect	0.051	1.9	0.7	2.1	0.8
CTQ Physical Neglect	0.008	1.8	0.2	2.0	0.5
CTQ Emotional Abuse	0.033	1.3	0.4	1.4	0.6
CTQ Physical Abuse	0.164	1.1	0.2	1.1	0.4
CTQ Sexual Abuse	0.030	1.1	0.3	0.3	1.3

Table 2 demonstrates the relationship between CTQ Total and CTQ Subscale scores and Infidelity tendency. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between CTQ Total and all five CTQ Subscale scores and infidelity tendency. The other independent variables (romantic jealousy and self-esteem) were not correlated with total childhood trauma or any other trauma subgroup scores.

Table 2. CTQ and Infidelity Tendency

	Infidelity Tendency
CTQ Total	0.35****
CTQ Emotional Neglect	0.23*
CTQ Physical Neglect	0.20*
CTQ Emotional Abuse	0.28***
CTQ Physical Abuse	0.22*
CTQ Sexual Abuse	0.20*

* < 0.05 *** < 0.005 ****< 0.001

4. Discussion

In the present study we assessed how childhood trauma affects adult attachment, infidelity tendency, romantic jealousy and self- esteem. The demographic variables of the participants showed education level to be a predictor of CTQ Total and CTQ Physical Neglect scores. The results indicated less educated subjects to be traumatized more during their childhood. In trauma subscale groups, only physical neglect was significantly predicted with low

education level. We assume low level of education is related to low SES therefore people coming from economically challenged backgrounds may face more physical neglect.

The study demonstrated childhood trauma also affects the attachment styles in romantic relationship. Subjects differed significantly in their CTQ Total scores in terms of their attachment styles (four different kinds) and there is a significant difference in CTQ Physical Neglect Subscale scores in terms of Secure and Dismissive /Avoidant Attachment Styles. As the physical neglect in childhood increases, subjects tend to show Dismissive/Avoidant attachment style in their romantic relationships, which means they avoid emotional attachment and deny needing close relationship with their partners. The theory suggests this attachment style is a defense against rejection and losing the ones they form intimate relations with. The children who faced physical neglect (which indicates not being provided the physical needs such as food, healthy care and physical care), may find it difficult to attach to their romantic partners, fearing even their most vital needs will not be taken care of and in order to survive they need to rely on themselves.

When we divided attachment into two major categories (secure and insecure attachment), we found securely attached subjects to be less traumatized during their childhood than insecurely attached subjects. Not only they scored significantly lower in CTQ Total but also their Physical Neglect, Emotional Abuse and Sexual Abuse Subscale scores were significantly lower than insecurely attached subjects. The result point out that our childhood traumas may prevent healthy attachment with our romantic partners in adulthood.

The other key finding of the study was the effect of trauma on infidelity tendency. Traumatized subjects showed more infidelity tendency. As the trauma increases in total trauma and all five subgroups of trauma scores, infidelity tendency increases significantly as well. The finding may shed light to the question of which factors affect infidelity tendency by presenting childhood trauma as one of the contributors.

5. Conclusion

Early attachment with caregivers in childhood plays a significant role in developing healthy relationships with other people such as peers, partners and children in later life (Howe *et al.*, 1999). Children who are abused often can not find their caretaker available or when they are present; their behaviors provoke anxiety, fear and anger (Howe, 2005). Sroufe *et al.* (1999) maintain that early attachment with the caretakers, can affect later capacity of forming emotional connectedness, building a safe and secure foundation in relationships and self-worth. The studies also showed the relationship between insecure attachment and emotion regulation (e.g., Shields & Cicchetti, 1997).

The findings in our study, consistent with these studies, demonstrated individuals who were abused or neglected in childhood, may develop dysfunctional patterns of emotional closeness, intimacy, safety seeking and building trust in romantic relationships due to their despaired attachment systems. Even though childhood trauma is an indicator of infidelity tendency, we could not find any difference in infidelity tendency in terms of attachment styles.

We presumed attachment functions as a mediator in the relationship of childhood trauma and infidelity tendency but the results indicated a different form of relationship between these variables, which should be addressed in further research. Romantic jealousy, which differed significantly among attachment groups (anxious/preoccupied presenting the most jealousy in romantic relationships followed by fearful/avoidant, secure and dismissive/avoidant), did not show any correlation with childhood trauma, which is another finding that can be further explored in future research.

References

- Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. (1991). Attachment styles among adults: A test of four category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 226–241.
- Bernstein, D.P., Fink, L., Handelsman, L., Foote, J., Lovejoy, M., Wenzel, K., Sapareto, E., & Ruggiero, J. (1994). Initial reliability and validity of a new retrospective measure of child abuse and neglect. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151, 1132 – 1136.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Separation, anxiety and anger*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Briere, J. (1996). A self trauma model for treating adult survivors of severe child abuse. In J. Briere, L. Berliner, J. A. Bulkley, C. Jenny & T. Reid (Eds.), *The APSAC handbook on childmaltreatment* (pp. 140-157). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Bringler, R. G., Buunk, B. (1985). Jealousy and social behavior: A review of person, relationship and situational determinants. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 6, 241-264.

- Demirtas, H. A. (2004). *Yakın ilişkilerde kıskançlık (bireysel ilişkisel ve durumsal değişkenler)*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey.
- Gross, A. B., & Keller, H. R. (1992). Long-term consequences of childhood physical and psychological maltreatment. *Aggressive Behavior, 18*, 171-185.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R., (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 511– 524.
- Howe, D. (2005). *Child abuse and neglect: Attachment, development and intervention*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D., & Schofield, G., (1999). *Attachment theory, child maltreatment and family support: A practice and assessment model*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates Press.
- Lyons-Ruth, K. (2003). Dissociation and the parent-infant dialogue: A longitudinal perspective from attachment research. *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytical Association, 51*, 883-911.
- Pines, A., & Aronson, E. (1983). Antecedents, correlates and consequences of sexual jealousy. *Journal of Personality, 51*, 108-136.
- Pines, A., & Friedman, A. (1998). Gender differences in romantic jealousy. *Journal of Social Psychology, 138*, 54–71.
- Polat, D. (2006). *Evlü bireylerin evlilik uyumları, aldatma eğilimleri ve çatışma eğilimleri arasındaki ilişkinin bazı değişkenler açısından incelenmesi*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sharpsteen, D. J., & Kirkpatrick, L. A. (1997). Romantic jealousy and adult romantic attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 627-640.
- Sar, V., & Öztürk, E. (2005). What is trauma and dissociation? *Journal of Trauma Practice, 4*(1-2), 7-20.
- Sümer, N., & Güngör, D. (1999). Yetişkin bağlanma stilleri ölçeklerinin Türk örneklemini üzerinde psikometrik ve kültürlerarası bir karşılaştırma. *Türk Psikoloji Dergisi, 14*, 71-106.
- Sroufe, L. A., Carlson, E., Levy, A., & Egeland, B. (1999). Implications of attachment theory for developmental psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology, 11*, 1–13.
- Shields, A., & Cicchetti, D. (1997). Emotion regulation among school-age children: The development and validation of a new criterion q-sort scale. *Developmental Psychology, 33*, 906–916.
- White, G. L. (1981). A model of romantic jealousy. *Motivation and Emotion, 5*, 295–231.